

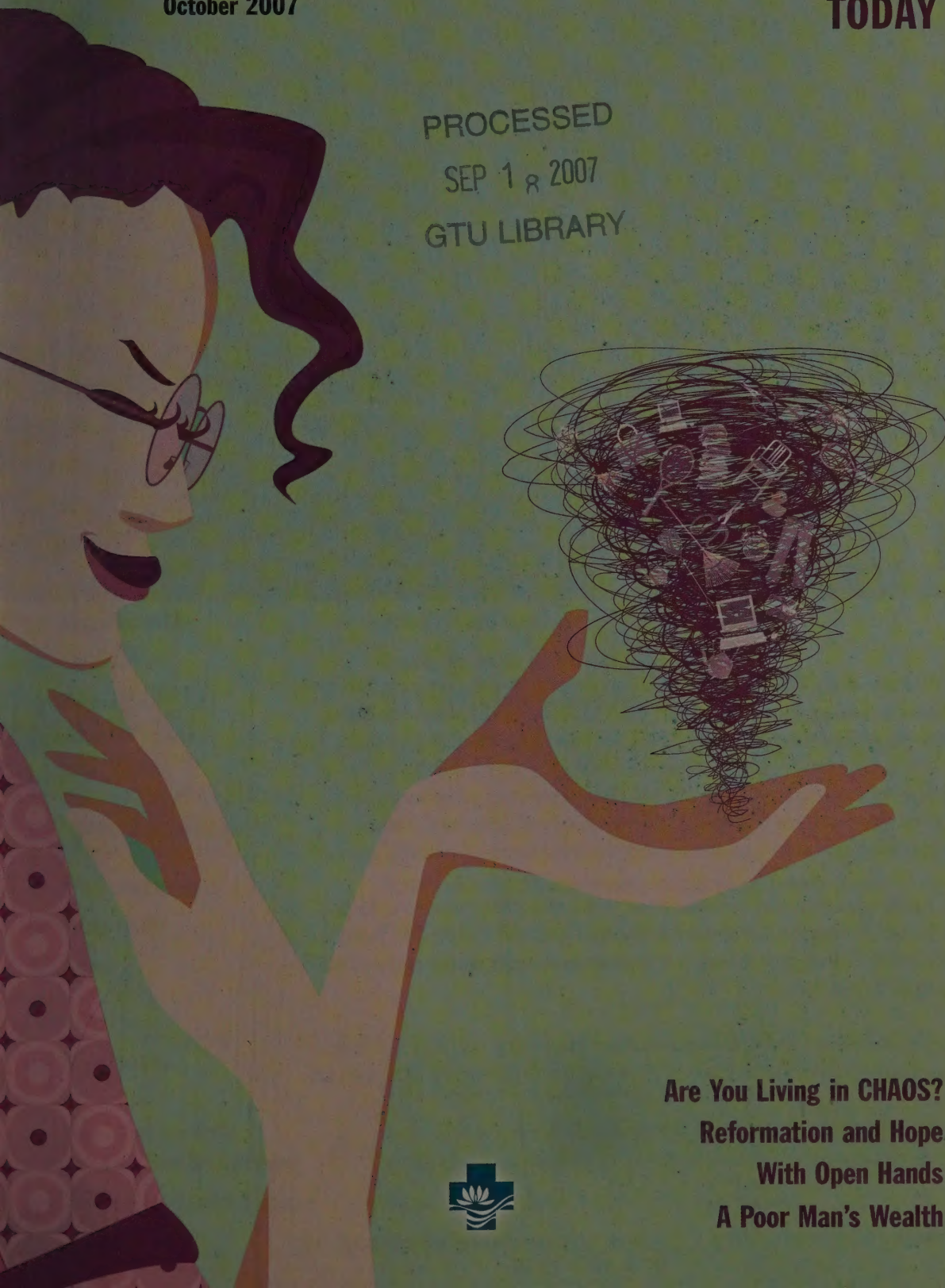
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# LutheranWoman

October 2007

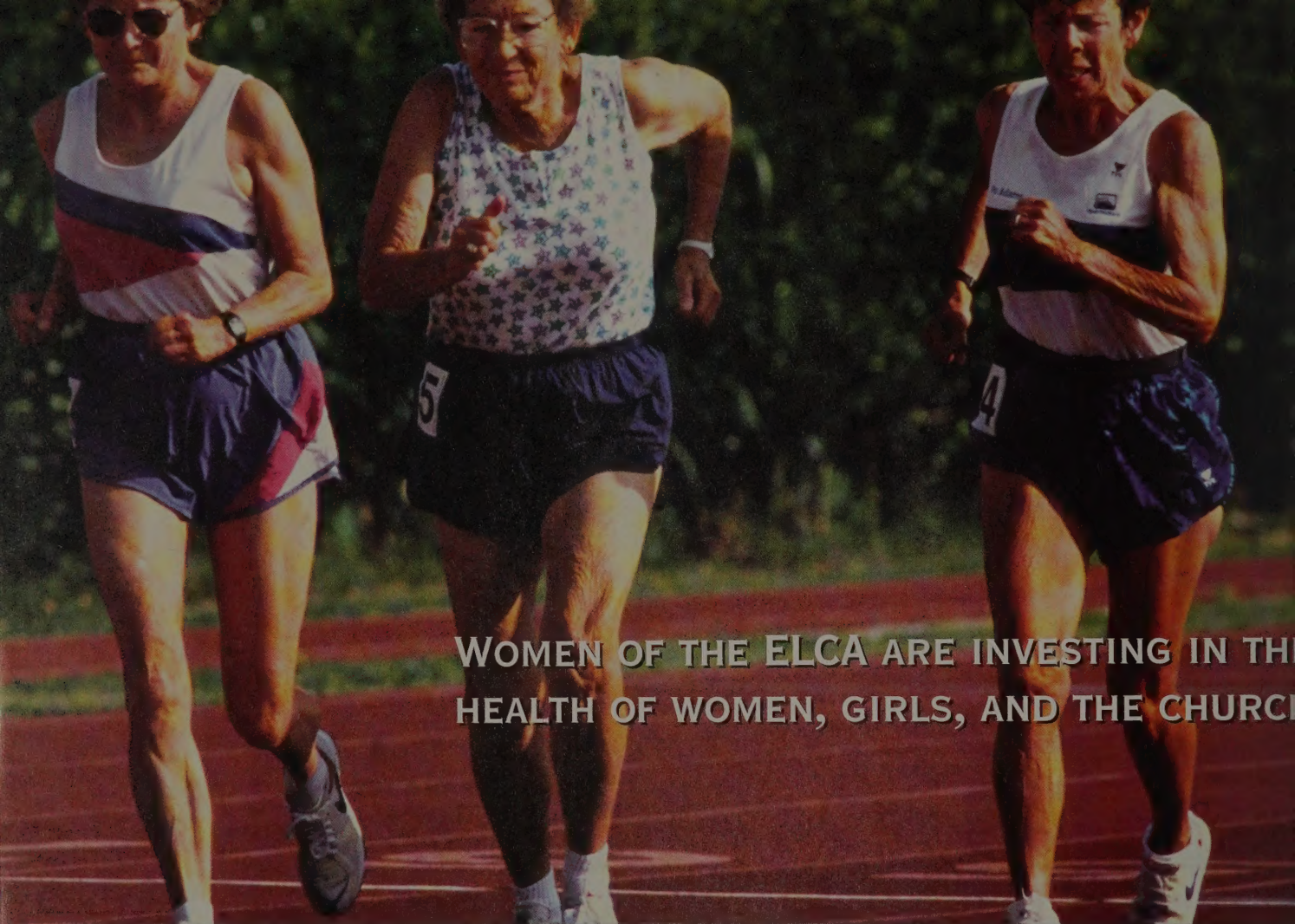
## TODAY

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**Are You Living in CHAOS?**  
**Reformation and Hope**  
**With Open Hands**  
**A Poor Man's Wealth**





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## OPEN HANDS

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Jesus knew the power of possessions to enthrall. That's why he opens his sermon with "Blessed are the poor in spirit." How do we live without being possessed by our possessions?

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VOICES

## Just Pavement

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

As we explore the theme of this issue, “Open Hands,” let me tell you an old joke:

A rich man dies and meets St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. He is very wealthy, but he’s been faithful and kind and St. Peter tells him, “Good news—you’re in!” But the man is sad because he loves his beautiful home and all his wonderful possessions. So he asks if he can bring one bag of his stuff with him into heaven. St. Peter says that it’s against policy (you can’t take it with you, after all) but he feels sorry for the man. So he says, “Okay, you can bring one sack of your treasures with you, but only one sack.”

So the man returns to his estate and looks at all of his elegant and expensive things. He has a hard time deciding what to bring. Finally, he goes to his safe where he has hidden several solid gold bars. He thinks that these gold bricks are his favorites . . . he worked so hard to get them and they were his security when economy was bad. So he stuffs them into the sack and carries them back to heaven. The path is steep and the gold is very heavy, but he eventually appears before St. Peter, dragging his sack.

St. Peter asks him if he can take a peek at what’s in the bag. The man proudly opens it and St. Peter looks in. Then bewildered and incredulous, St. Peter looks at the man and says, “Pavement? You brought pavement?!”

Now, for this joke to be funny, you have to know the description of the New Jerusalem from Revelation 21:21 (“the street of the city is pure gold”).

This is a joke that comes back to me at opportune times, say, when I’m visiting a church and the collection basket comes by. I look into my beat-up red wallet and see what’s in there: a couple of ones, a five, and a twenty. A voice in my head says, “Give the twenty—it’s just pavement.”

In this session of the Bible study, author Martha E. Stortz explores the Beatitude “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” She reminds us of the danger of being possessed by our possessions. She writes: “Through our baptism . . . we already set one foot into the kingdom of heaven. The only way to continue the journey is with open hands, ready to receive the gifts and the guidance offered us.”

In “With Open Hands,” the Rev. Patricia Lull tells us that “Thankful living is open-handed living. We who have received God’s grace come to see others differently, and in that seeing, our own lives become increasingly open-handed and generous.”

We can’t find balance in our lives until we have a healthy relationship with our “stuff,” Susan Greeley writes in “Are You Living in CHAOS?” She points out how scarcity mentality can sabotage our best intentions.

So how do we learn to live with our possessions in a healthy way, with thankful hearts and open hands? Through the practice of stewardship and the disposition of generosity. May this issue encourage you as you make your way. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You can write to her at [LWT@elca.org](mailto:LWT@elca.org).





GIVE US THIS DAY

## All in the Family

by Marj Leegard

Most of us have mental file cabinets where we organize people. The labels are rudimentary: *us* and *them*. We are separated into neat folders and we snuggle down safely in our beige cardboard divisions. We can probably find a radio commentator who agrees with us. We can find a political party that will hold up the banner for our choice of language or our stand on social issues. When my friend Marie was small, she was playing under the kitchen table with her sister and the visiting children. The mothers and grandmothers were gathered around the table with coffee cups. Marie admonished the other children, "Don't let them know we're under here or they'll start talking Norwegian!"

The language changes over time. Customs change. Even taste in food takes twists and turns, and we end up eating pizza on Christmas Eve.

Perhaps it helped to learn how to lace our fingers together as we chanted, "This is the church. This is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people." And there they were, all cozy together. It might be good to call each other *brother* or *sister* as some faith groups do. I know many people I would love to call sister and many who would make wonderful brothers in the faith. But better yet will be the day when we can look at any of God's children and love them as sisters and brothers.

A long time ago, a woman told about her two adopted children. She and her husband made sure that the children knew from the beginning that they were adopted.

Being a chosen child was a happy thing.

Then one day the children came home from school with tears running down their cheeks. They did not stop in the kitchen for the usual hugs. Their mother followed them. What could have happened?

She held them close while they cried. Finally the little boy said, "You never told us, so it can't be true." The little girl uncovered her face for just the smallest moment and whispered, "But James said so. And he said his mother said so."

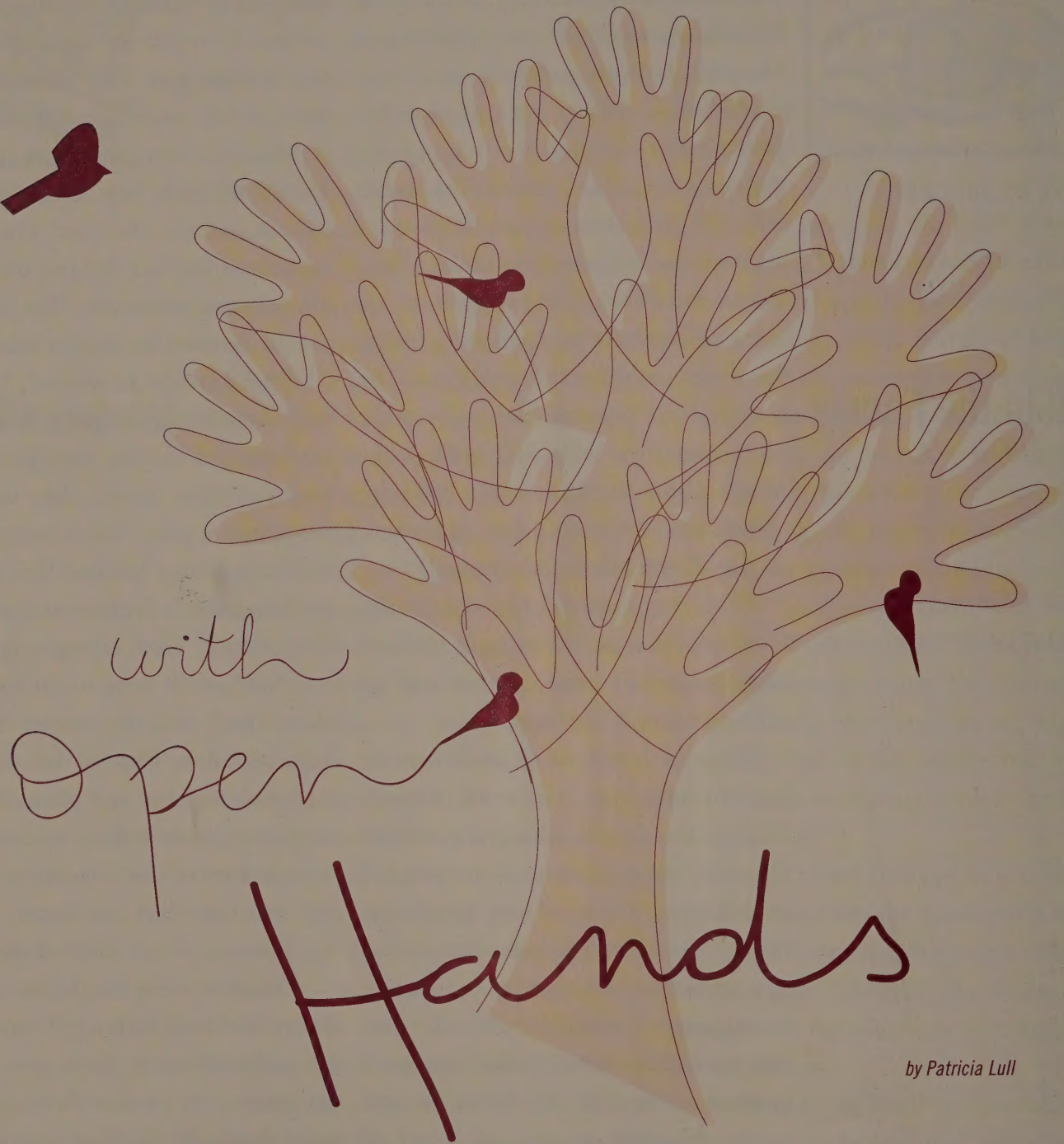
The mother answered, "We told you about being adopted. You are our children, and we love you. You are ours forever." "But, Mom," they both tried to explain at once, "she's not my sister" and "he's not my brother! He's probably someone else's brother and we're not even related." Fresh crying erupted.

"Well, we'll have to do something about that," said the mother. She gave hugs and then they all sat down and ate lunch together and planned how to explain to James and his mother that all the members of God's family are related. We are all brothers and sisters.

The story is not finished yet.

When we were tiny babies with one damp little curl, such a gift was beyond our comprehension. Even now that we are grown, we cannot claim to understand the family that God gives us. Some came before us. Some are beside us. Some of our sisters and brothers are searching with hands outstretched. Reach out to them! Help them feel at home. 🌸

**Marj Leegard** and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.



by Patricia Lull



Both those who have gone before us and those coming up at our heels can help us learn to see the world in a new way. In the case of recycling paper and glass and plastic containers, seeing the connection between the environment and our own lives changes how we live. No one thinks it's enough to talk about the environment; talk must be translated into action. And most of those actions can be broken down into small, daily decisions and deeds.

There is another great teacher for many of us. In the Christian community, we are also shaped by the actions of God. The testimony of the Bible tells us how God chooses to interact with the human community, and whether or not we have grown up in families with values about recycling, reusing things until they are worn out, or in families with high regard for the land, as we listen to the Word of God we come to see the world in a fresh way.

"The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season," the psalmist proclaims in Psalm 145. "You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing." Living with open hands is a description of God's way of interacting with us.

I remember hearing this Bible passage spoken as a table prayer when I visited a friend's family while I was in college. To my ear it was beautiful poetry; for my friend it was

a daily litany, written deeply into her being. Whether or not we speak the words of Psalm 145 as a daily table grace, in the Christian community we learn to trust our open-handed God to provide all that we need. God's interaction with us forms our most basic interaction with others.

### Asking and trusting

As a parish pastor, I have had the privilege of learning from several congregations what it means to offer an open hand of generosity to others. The people of one of those congregations, a small church in southern Ohio, were particularly experienced in reaching out to people in dire need in their town. When a young couple living at the homeless shelter showed up for worship on a Sunday morning, they were invited to stay for brunch. Soon, several adults in the congregation were serving as informal mentors and friends to the couple.

When the church needed a part-time custodian, the young man was everyone's top choice. He was a hard worker and eager for the affirmation of being part of the staff. Some months later, several checks were stolen from the church office. It quickly came to light that the young man, the eager custodian, was the thief.

Confronting him with the cancelled checks, I asked him why he had done this, why he would betray

*I live in a neighborhood with curbside recycling. Walking together on a summer evening, my neighbor and I commented on the many blue recycling bins set out at the curb. We talked about how we each had learned to take recycling seriously. She spoke of growing up in the country and her family's deep regard for the land. I recalled lessons from my childhood, which were mostly about reusing things that weren't worn out. But as we walked, I also credited the many young adults whose insistence on recycling a stray pop can or bundle of cardboard had helped me acquire this new discipline.*



*You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every*

the relationships he had built up with so many in the congregation. He explained that there had been unexpected bills at home and that he and his wife were desperate. Then he said one more thing: "I knew I could never ask for what I needed." That was really a profound description of the many wounds and disappointments he had borne in his young life.

How many of us go through life like that, grabbing and hoarding what we think we need but for which we dare not ask? As the young thief discovered as he apologized and repaid what he had stolen, truly open-handed relationships are about asking and trusting, not about stealing and hoarding.

Yet in the human community, learning to name our real needs, like learning to trust those on whom we depend, takes time and practice. And who has been more patient and open-handed with us than God? God knows what we truly need, whether that be material things or relationships that give meaning and joy to our lives.

### Hospitality and generosity

As a Christian I continue to be instructed by the generosity of oth-

ers within the community of faith. Living with open hands has little to do with economic wealth or social status, but it has everything to do with trusting in God's generosity to us and God's care for all in need.

I regularly travel with seminarians to a small city in the highlands of Guatemala. Our hosts in San Lucas Tolimán are members of the Roman Catholic parish there. These Mayan women and men have written hospitality and generosity to those in need into the mission statement for their parish. Year-round they welcome 50 to 100 guests at a time, inviting people from the United States to come and share their life.

Guatemala is an extraordinarily beautiful land with a rich cultural heritage and a complex history of colonial oppression and a recent devastating civil war. All the economic inequities of our world are visible in this small country where the few, who are very wealthy, have much and the many, who are very poor, have hardly anything at all.

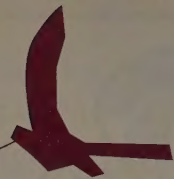
But understanding God's open-handed generosity really has nothing to do with having money. During our stay in the highlands, the seminarians and I learn directly from the life of these Christian sisters and

brothers who feed and house us, invite us to see the way they are investing in grassroots rebuilding of a community, and gather with us for prayer and worship of our generous and life-giving God.

Near the close of each trip I wait expectantly for the seminarians' reflections on what they have learned during our stay. Always there are comments about the impact of working at the coffee co-operative or the reforestation project, both sponsored by the parish. Students remember the hours with local leaders clearing land for a housing project or a neighborhood park. Eventually the conversation always comes around to the profound Christian faith of our hosts, reflected in their respect for the poorest members of the community—including widows and young children—generosity toward us as guests, and confidence in God's grace and mercy to provide all that is needed.

Year after year, the seminarians never fail to note how our own group has been transformed by living together for two weeks in this context of generosity. Living communally and traveling light, our group always has its eyes opened to how differently relationships are





built when there are fewer material distractions to pull us away from one another. During our time in Guatemala, we discover how precious the gift of simply having time for one another has become in our busy lives. One of the best lessons our hosts teach us in Guatemala is this way of seeing one another as signs of God's gracious presence in this world.

### Thankful living

Like the young couple welcomed into the life of that congregation in Ohio, we all crave relationships in which we are welcomed with open-handed generosity. Human dignity depends on all of us living with trust and confidence that we may ask for what we really need, rather than believing that we must steal or grab, hoard or withhold so that we may be among the few who thrive in our world.

I now belong to another congregation that practices open-handed generosity. We often use a liturgy for our early evening worship service that includes an offertory song based on Psalm 145 (*Unfailing Light Liturgy* by Marty Haugen and Susan Briehl, including "By Your Hand You Feed Your People,"

words © 2000 GIA Publications, Inc.; music © 2004 GIA Publications, Inc.). As the monetary gifts are carried forward and the bread and wine are set upon the table, the congregation sings in praise of God's gracious and open-handed love for all creation.

That song of praise echoes throughout the week in the lives of those who worship there. An attorney offers her services pro bono to a group advocating for people with mental illness. A schoolteacher takes extra time with a child whose family just arrived from Somalia. A retiree creates cards and sends them to the people on the prayer list. A young couple volunteers at the homeless shelter. Each expresses in daily deeds the same generosity by which God feeds us at that table.

"You open your hand, and satisfy the desire of every living thing," people of faith have sung through the ages, and from generation to generation God has responded. This psalm is both petition and benediction. Said at the dinner table, as it was by my college classmate's family, it evokes a response of gratitude for God's unfailing generosity. Thankful living is open-handed living. We who have received God's

grace come to see others differently, and in that seeing, our own lives become increasingly open-handed and generous.

It should be no surprise that Jesus had a particularly effective ministry with thieves and tax collectors, those who approached life with a clutching and grabbing spirit. Once Jesus invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house (Luke 19:1-10), turning the tables on this leader whose life was based not on trust in an open-handed God but on shaking a disproportionate profit out of others. But when Jesus sat at Zacchaeus' table, it was the life of the host that was transformed. At the end of the meal Zacchaeus himself announced, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (19:8).

And so it goes with all of us who have received from God's grace and generosity. As we have received, so we offer to others—from the open hands of God to an open-handed attitude toward others. 🌸

**The Rev. Patricia Lull** serves as dean of students at Luther Seminary and as an affiliated pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minn.





## CALENDAR NOTES

# October

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley  
from sources including *Evangelical  
Lutheran Worship, Sundays and  
Seasons, and Lutheran Book  
of Worship, published by  
Augsburg Fortress, Publishers  
(www.augsburgfortress.org)*

This month's liturgical calendar includes the commemorations of many renewers of the church and of society. How can their stories inspire us to act boldly as they did?

### 4 Francis of Assisi, renewer of society

Francis was the dashing young son of one of the wealthiest families in Assisi. His career as a renewer of the church and the world began in a dilapidated wayside chapel, when he heard a voice say, "Go, Francis, and repair my house, which as you see is in ruins." He died on this date in 1226. See page 32 for more on Francis and his love of Lady Poverty.

### 4 Theodor Fliedner, renewer of society

Pastor Fliedner was instrumental in reviving the ministry of deaconesses among Lutherans. He died on this date in 1864.

### 6 William Tyndale, translator

In the face of stern royal opposition, Tyndale translated the New Testament into English, completing it in 1525. In 1534, he started translating the Old Testament but was burned at the stake before it was complete. A colleague finished it, and the Tyndale-Coverdale Bible was published in 1537.

### 7 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 27

Every Sunday this month, we hear from Paul's second letter to his younger colleague Timothy. Paul eloquently appeals to Timothy (and to us!) to carry on the work of proclaiming the gospel, the "sound teaching that you have heard from

me." Today's texts are Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10.

### 8 Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, pastor

This founding father of the Lutheran church in America immigrated in 1742 after Pennsylvanian Lutherans asked for trained clergy. In 1748, he called the first synod assembly on this continent, prepared a uniform liturgy, and compiled a hymnal. His colleagues held him in such respect that they often asked him to help settle differences between fellow Lutherans, and even among other Christians.

### 14 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 28

In today's second reading, we hear Paul exhorting Timothy (and us!) to present himself before God as a worker who has rightly explained the word of truth. What do we need to be able to explain the word of truth rightly? We need to know it well. Today's appointed texts are 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19.

### 15 Teresa of Ávila, renewer of the church

This Spanish writer and mystic had a conviction of sin and complete dependence on God's grace that was similar to Martin Luther's. And her dedication to humility led her to an appreciation of poverty that echoed Francis of Assisi's. Her writings are still read today; you might look for her autobiography at the library.

### 17 Ignatius of Antioch, martyr

On the long march from Antioch to Rome where the lions awaited,



Ignatius spoke to delegations of Christians and wrote letters to churches, seven of which have survived. In these letters, he urges unity in Christian love and in sound doctrine, the role of local clergy as a focus of unity, and the glorious privilege of martyrdom.

### 18 Luke, evangelist

Since about the year 170, Paul's companion Luke has been identified as the writer of both the Gospel that traditionally bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles (the text of neither book reveals the writer's name). His gifted storytelling and skillful writing have touched the hearts of readers since the beginning. What story of Luke's do you find most moving? The texts appointed for Luke's festival are Isaiah 43:8–13 or Isaiah 35:5–8; 2 Timothy 4:5–11; Luke 1:1–4 and 24:44–53.

### 21 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 29

Today Paul tells Timothy to keep on in what he has learned, reminding him that he has known the sacred writings from childhood. Paul must be thinking of Timothy's grandmother, Lois, and mother Eunice, whom he named at the beginning of the letter. What does this tell us about our own duties to our young relatives and friends? Today's texts are Genesis 32:22–31; 2 Timothy 3:14–4:5; Luke 18:1–8.

### 23 James of Jerusalem, martyr

The book of Acts shows us James as a leader of the believers in Jerusalem, and tradition calls him the first bishop of that holy city. He was martyred in about the year 62.

### 26 Philipp Nicolai, Johann Heerman, and Paul Gerhardt, hymn writers

These three German hymn writers all flourished in the 17th century. This year is the 400th anniversary of Gerhardt's birth; nine of his hymns are in *ELW*.

### 28 Reformation Sunday

Many congregations will sing Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," today. The earliest existing printed version is in a 1531 hymnal published in Nuremberg, with the melody we know. Only one note has changed in all that time. Today's texts are Jeremiah 31:31–34; Romans 3:19–28; John 8:31–36.

### 28 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 30

Most congregations will observe Reformation Sunday today, but we also have texts appointed for the Sunday after Pentecost. And here we read the last part of Paul's letter to Timothy.

So what happened to Timothy? Did he carry on in the work, as Paul exhorted him to? Apparently he did. An old tradition has it that Timothy became bishop of Ephesus and was martyred in the year 97.

The texts for Sunday are Jeremiah 14:7–10, 19–22; 2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18; and Luke 18:9–14.

### 28 Simon and Jude, apostles

Simon is only mentioned in Scripture in lists, and today's Gospel gives us the only words we have from Jude's lips. Some have said that the obscurity of these two apostles is an encouragement to other Christians whose faith goes unnoticed by the world. Today's texts are Jeremiah 26:1–6, 7–16; 1 John 4:1–6; and John 14:21–27.

### 31 Reformation Day

On this day in 1517, Martin Luther, professor of theology at the university of Wittenberg, posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church. His goal was merely to spark discussion among his fellow theologians—but clearly, the Holy Spirit had other plans!

You might ponder the texts appointed for Reformation Day with that in mind: Jeremiah 31:31–34; Romans 3:19–28; John 8:31–36.

Earlier this year, Women of the ELCA toured Lutheran heritage sites in Germany in celebration of our 20th anniversary. We were thrilled to worship in the Castle Church and sing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" around Martin Luther's grave. Read more about the amazing experience on page 18 in this issue.





## Learning to Make a Difference

by Stephanie Jurss

Left to Right: Chicago LVC volunteers Margaret Androwski, Courtney Walker, and Angela Root.

And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? *Micah 6:8*

I call my parents from the foyer of a large church in Washington on the second day of orientation. It is quiet; the only sound I can hear is that of muffled voices from the second floor.

Phone pressed tightly to my ear, I tell my parents every single thing I can remember about the past two days. We had anti-racism training. And we learned about simplified living. We went to a grocery store and compared the prices of organic and conventional produce. We've been eating vegetarian for every meal, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And I've met my housemates.

We've been working hard on building our community together.

When I finish, my mother tells me something I am not expecting to hear. "I have good news," she says. "The church council and the pastors met on Monday night. They voted to give you money to support you during your year with Lutheran Volunteer Corps."

I am speechless.



After I hang up the phone, I sit in the chair for a couple of minutes, thinking how blessed I am—to have not only the financial support of my congregation, but also their moral support. I rest in the knowledge that they are behind me as I begin my journey with Lutheran Volunteer Corps (LVC).

Inspired by other volunteers I first heard about Lutheran Volunteer Corps through a youth director at my church. She had served with LVC in Milwaukee, working as a youth director at an inner-city church. Her work inspired me.

As I researched the volunteer program and later interviewed with the city coordinator for admittance into LVC, I learned more about this program and what I would be doing during my year of service.

Lutheran Volunteer Corps seeks to integrate social justice, intentional community, simplicity, and spirituality. They place volunteers in 10 cities throughout the United States and ask them to spend a year working in non-profit agencies. The volunteers are placed based on their interests and previous experience.

Some of the agencies where LVC volunteers work offer direct service to those in need: homeless shelters, schools, legal clinics, churches, and so on. Others offer indirect services, employing volunteers as community organizers or in

advocacy. The job I took is at the Howard Area Community Center (HACC) on the far north side of Chicago. HACC serves low-income families in the area through five programs, and I was placed in the early childhood education program, as a classroom teacher.

### Intentional community

One of the most challenging aspects of LVC is living in an intentional community. Each intentional community is formed of four to seven volunteers who live together in an apartment or house. My community includes four young women: Kristine, Danielle, Karen, and me. In addition to sharing living space, we also share chores, grocery shopping, cooking, laundry, and other responsibilities. We eat together as often as we can and have community night once a week.

As an intentional community, we make decisions together and work on integrating our experiences and backgrounds into our community. For example, Karen is a vegetarian, so our community chooses to eat mostly vegetarian meals. We also try to buy organic foods, eat at locally owned establishments, and buy fair-trade products. All of these decisions come from our desire to live simply and work for social justice around the world.

Each of us receives a stipend of \$600 monthly. After rent and trans-

portation, each of us has \$85 for food and \$100 for personal expenses. Clearly, we have to budget thoughtfully. For example, we must think about whether we should buy more expensive organically grown food or cheaper but less environmentally sound conventionally grown food.

LVC provides volunteers a support network, the Local Support Committee (LSC), made up of alumni and friends of LVC who live in the area. Two leaders meet with the members of the house monthly, facilitating discussions on issues such as conflict resolution and spirituality. This allows the community to talk about issues that may be hard to bring to the floor, especially when we are first getting to know each other. The LSC also helps communities with furniture or appliances if needed, and also supports LVC by being part of the placement process, fundraising, and working toward long-term goals.

Along with the LSC, volunteers are also matched with support congregations. My community is supported by Ebenezer Lutheran Church near where we live and work. The support congregation provides spiritual support; ours has also given us new dishes and has taken us skating with the youth group.

My housemates and our work  
My housemates and I come from different places and have different



interests. Three of us are new college graduates, and the fourth one graduated a few years ago.

Kristine, from Minneapolis, works with the social services program at Howard Area Community Center, serving in the food pantry and legal clinic. She also reviews applications for a state program that helps low-income families pay their heating bills.

Danielle is from Seattle and works for two sister organizations: the Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America and the Chicago Metropolitan Sanctuary Alliance. Both provide community education and advocacy and partner with communities in Latin America to offer sanctuary for people seeking refuge. Danielle has traveled to Guatemala and Washington to learn about the issues that affect people in Latin America.

Karen is from the San Francisco Bay area. She taught for four years before deciding that God was calling her in a different direction. Karen works for Uptown Ministries, a drop-in shelter for the homeless. Her responsibilities include the food pantry, a tutoring program, and development projects.

I am from Wisconsin. I am a classroom teacher at HACC, working with eight two-year-olds and two co-teachers. My first impression of my new job came from one of my little students. The day

before I started work, I visited my classroom so that I could meet the children I would be working with for the next year. I smiled at the kids and introduced myself. The kids stared up at me with big round eyes, not saying a word. One little girl, however, looked at me and started screaming.

I left that day wondering what I had gotten myself into. I had never worked with two-year-olds before. In fact, all I knew about two-year-olds was that they were in the “terrible twos” stage, and that was not a good thing.

I soon came to realize that my job consisted of changing diapers, feeding, singing songs, reading stories, planning activities, and so on. But more than that, I realized that the program provided kids with a safe, consistent environment that they might not get at home.

Not always easy

One little girl—I’ll call her Isabel—was 18 months old. She often came to school dirty, even without a clean diaper. Her single mother had four other kids living with her. In January I learned that Isabel would be leaving the center because her mother could not submit proof that she was working (a requirement for the program). I struggled with this, knowing how much Isabel needed to be at HACC and how helpless she was.

As I struggled with accepting what happened to Isabel, I turned to my housemates for their support. One of the benefits of living in community is having community members to turn to for advice or comfort. I told them about Isabel and how much I knew she needed to be at Howard Area. Having housemates to talk to helped me work through my feelings and trust that God will take care of her.

Working for social justice is not easy, I realized. Though many non-profit and for-profit organizations face the same problems, I have learned that the difference lies in the mission of the organization. Non-profit organizations are ultimately about providing affordable services to people in need.

Sometimes I wonder if I am making a difference in the lives of the children in my classroom. Then I understand that simply being there for the kids in my classroom, giving them hugs, and providing them a safe place to learn can make all the difference in the world for them. 🌿  
**Stephanie Jurss** is a member of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wis., and is now pursuing graduate studies at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

*To learn more about Lutheran  
Volunteer Corps, visit  
[www.lutheranvolunteercorps.org](http://www.lutheranvolunteercorps.org).*





LET US PRAY

## Freeing Up Space

by Debra K. Farrington

**When I married and** moved in with my husband a couple of years ago he offered me about a foot and a half of closet space to hang up my clothes. Now, my husband is a very generous man and this offer was no reflection on that; those 18 inches were actually half the closet. We live in a house built nearly a century ago, with lots of charm and little storage space.

Not only did we need to find a place for my clothes but we had to find room for plenty of other stuff. Both of us—adults marrying in mid-life—had complete households. There were two kitchens' worth of dishes and pans, more towels and sheets than anyone needs, and you don't even want to hear about the number of books we had between us. We spent several months going through all our possessions, deciding which things we would keep and which we would give away. The experience not only left me lighter in terms of possessions, but lighter spiritually as well. Too much clutter and too little free space clog the soul.

Many of us have more possessions than we need. "As Christians," writes theologian Margaret Kim Peterson, "we are called to respond differently to abundance. Many things in life . . . are truly good. They are to be treated with . . . respect, and sometimes that means saying no to too much. [We must take] material things seriously enough to be willing to get rid of them or to decline to acquire them in the first place" (in *Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life*, Jossey Bass, 2007; p. 54).

Make clearing out stuff you don't need anymore into a spiritual practice. Begin by asking God to open your arms and hands so you can let go of things that you no longer use, and recycle those with some life left in them to others who might genuinely need them. Then start going through your closets, bookshelves, and (if you're truly brave) attic or basement, asking yourself what you really want or need to keep.

Maybe it's time to give away clothes that no longer fit (be honest!) or that you haven't worn in a year to an organization that can recycle them to others.

Go through the books and the pans and gadgets in the kitchen with the same goal in mind. Is someone graduating from college this year and setting up her first apartment? Is there a local shelter that might be able to use some of those extra dishes crowding your closets and cupboards? Maybe your library would appreciate donations for their book sale. An animal shelter might find those old towels, sheets, and blankets very helpful.

So many of God's children have pressing needs, and you may have useful items sitting unused in your home. Consider lightening your load this fall and giving those useable materials away. Letting go of things you don't need frees up space not only in your home but also in your soul, making more room for God. 🌿

**Debra K. Farrington** is the author of eight books of Christian spirituality and an experienced retreat leader and speaker. Check out her Web site at [www.debrafarrington.com](http://www.debrafarrington.com).





HEALTH WISE

## The Body at War with Itself

by Molly M. Ginty

### Carla Vargas wished

it was food poisoning.

In April 2006, she discovered that the nausea, vomiting, and fatigue she was suffering were not signs of an ordinary upset stomach, but the first signs of lupus, an autoimmune disorder in which the body's defense system turns on itself and attacks healthy tissue.

"Lupus had targeted my kidneys, which were beginning to fail," says Vargas, a 24-year-old college administrator in Falls Church, Virginia. "My doctor sent me straight to the hospital, where I stayed for two weeks. For six months afterward, I had to take medications that caused hair loss, weight gain, and insomnia."

Despite these side effects—and despite knowing she has an incurable disease—Vargas counts herself lucky. "Lupus can be difficult to detect, and catching it early saved my life," she says. "I'm blessed that it's only affected my kidneys and that the drugs I continue to take are keeping it under control."

An inflammatory disease that usually strikes the kidneys, joints, skin, blood cells, or heart, lupus can be difficult to diagnose—and so difficult to treat that the 1.5 million Americans who have it must remain ever vigilant. Since 90 percent of patients are women—and since the disease usually strikes them between the ages of 15 and 45—health advocates are making a special effort in October, which is Lupus Awareness Month, to warn young women like Vargas about this chronic disease.

Menstruation. Pregnancy. Infections.

Stress. And exposure to ultraviolet light. If you're predisposed to lupus, any of these can trigger a flare-up, spurring your antibodies to attack your own cells and causing inflammation and pain in almost any part of the body.

Achy joints. Fever. Swelling. Fatigue. Reddened skin. Anemia. Kidney problems. And chest pain. These are the most common signs of lupus. Others include a butterfly-shaped rash across the nose, hair loss, seizures, mouth ulcers, clogged arteries, inflammation in the chest, and fingers that turn pale in the cold (Raynaud's syndrome).

"These symptoms can appear one at a time, or all at once," says Dr. Gary Gilkerson, vice chair of medicine at the Medical University of South Carolina and a spokesperson for the Lupus Foundation of America. "They can be short-term or lifelong, contained in one part of the body or systemic. Lupus symptoms can mimic signs of other illnesses. All of this makes the disease very difficult to diagnose, which is why it can take from one to three years—and three to four physicians—before you know you have it."

To help clinicians make definitive diagnoses, the American College of Rheumatology has compiled a list of 11 set symptoms that are hallmarks of lupus. The presence of at least four is considered proof of the disease.

When people know that they have lupus, they can control flare-ups by shunning sunlight (which may trigger skin rashes), getting regular exercise (to fight fatigue), and breaking bad health

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This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) for more information.



habits such as smoking or drinking heavily (which can exacerbate symptoms).

They can load up on fish (rich in anti-inflammatory omega-3 fatty acids) while avoiding nightshade vegetables such as tomatoes and eggplants (which may trigger flare-ups). To compensate for the loss of sunlight, which the body needs to make vitamin D, they can take supplements to ensure that they get at least 800 IUs of vitamin D per day.

People with lupus should shun medications known to cause flare-ups, such as minocycline (an antibiotic), hydralazine (for high blood pressure) and procainamide (a heart medication). But they may need to take other drugs that combat lupus: immunosuppressants, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), anti-malaria drugs (which ease skin, joint, and ulcer problems), and corticosteroids (to reduce inflammation).

Women need to take extra precautions. Birth control pills are not recommended for women with lupus, since they may already have blood-clotting problems, and IUDs carry an increased risk of infection. While it's generally considered safe to get pregnant, symptoms can worsen around the fourth week of gestation. Lupus can cause antiphospholipid syndrome, which compromises blood clotting and can lead to miscarriage. Mothers with lupus can pass the condition on to their infants even if they have no symptoms themselves. And while women over 50 usually have milder flare-ups, hormone therapy to treat the symptoms of menopause can



exacerbate these episodes.

While researchers work to improve treatments for lupus, they are also trying to find its cause. Only 10 percent of people with the disease have a close relative who is also affected, but lupus seems to have some genetic component: It is more common among African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans than among Whites. Last summer, scientists discovered a genetic defect that makes some mice susceptible to lupus. Other studies show that blocking the expression of certain genes can minimize symptoms. "In humans, there may be 50 to 60 genes involved in lupus," says Gilkeson. "When we find them, we will make great progress in fighting this difficult disease." 🌿

**Molly M. Ginty** lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women's eNews*.

#### For more information

Lupus Foundation of America

[www.lupus.org](http://www.lupus.org)

American College of Rheumatology

[www.rheumatology.org](http://www.rheumatology.org)





*Ruins of the Nimbschen Monastery where Katie Luther made her vows as a nun.*



*The City Hall of Grimma, near the monastery.*

# Reformation and Hope

*by Audrey Novak Riley and Deb Bogaert*

In April, 82 bold women (and a few men) visited Germany to see the sites where Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora Luther lived, worked, and died. We were there to learn about life as a Christian in Luther's footprints then and now. This "Bold Women of the Reformation" tour was part of the celebration of the 20th anniversary of Women of the ELCA. We learned about more than Reformation history on this trip—we discovered how the church has been an agent of reformation and hope even into our own time.

We began in Berlin, the capital of reunited Germany, a vibrant city where the past is always present. We visited the Berliner Dom for midday prayer; this monumental cathedral is home to the Evangelical Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg. We were interested to note that we never saw the word *Lutheran*—ever since the King of Prussia united the Lutheran and Reformed churches in the 19th century, *Evangelical* is used.

The Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, in a bustling shopping district, is in two parts. The old part is a broken steeple, left just as it was

after the city was repeatedly bombed during World War II. The new part is a modern building glazed with 21,000 blocks of blue stained glass from Chartres, a symbol of reconciliation between old enemies.

## Effects of the past

Almost all our route was in the former East Germany, a place held under totalitarian rule and closed to the West for decades. The 1989 opening of the Iron Curtain made it possible for Lutherans again to visit the places where Luther walked. We were amazed and delighted by





*These windows in the chapel of the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt were there when Martin Luther made his vows.*



*The Rev. Dawn Hansen, director for programs, Women of the ELCA, preaches in the Castle Church.*



*The tower of the Castle Church where Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses in 1517.*

the beauty of the cities and countryside we visited—everything seemed freshly painted or newly remodeled, clean and colorful, with very few exceptions.

As we walked with our sisters and brothers who are the church in that part of the Lutheran world, we learned of the challenges the church there faces. One challenge, clearly a result of the oppression of those previous regimes, is the very small number of practicing Christians in Germany. Recent surveys show that only about 33 percent of the population in the former East Germany

consider themselves members of any religious denomination, and only about 5 percent attend services weekly. Only about 30 percent say they believe in God. (By contrast, in the United States, 78 percent consider themselves members of a religious denomination, and about 96 percent say they believe in God.) How did this come about?

The Communist East German government (the GDR) did its best to discourage the practice of faith, although it did not interfere in the internal affairs of the churches. For example, one of our guides, a retired

teacher, told us that “in GDR times” he could never be made principal of his school because he was a practicing Christian.

A pastor in Leipzig told us of another tactic the GDR used to separate people from the church. Confirmation, for most people, was simply an occasion for a party for a teen becoming an adult, a time to give presents and take pictures. A parallel secular ceremony was developed by the GDR, and teens who did not take part in the secular ceremony would not be admitted to the university. The GDR’s long cam-



paign to separate people from the church was devastatingly effective.

### Like yeast

The pastor in Leipzig told us that though their numbers are small, Christians feel that their purpose is to be like yeast, bringing life and light to their surroundings.

One of those communities of yeast is the Diaconal Community of Dresden. Sisters Esther and Sylvia welcomed us and sketched the history of the community.

In 1844, four Dresden noblewomen opened a house where they would live, pray, and work together, serving the sick in their own home. In 1846, these women and their guests moved to a larger property, and here they remain.

During World War II, Dresden was bombed and the deaconesses' chapel and hospital were not spared. In 1961, the chapel was at last reopened. The sisters welcome neighbors and visitors to join them in worship daily.

On the front of the lectern in the chapel is a Coventry cross, formed of large nails. The cathedral of Coventry in England was also heavily damaged in World War II; it has been at the forefront of movements for peace and reconciliation ever since (see [www.crossofnails.org](http://www.crossofnails.org)). In 1965, the Coventry movement sent a group of young Englishmen to help rebuild the dea-

conesses' hospital. The deaconesses have never forgotten this. Every Friday at noon, the community gathers in the chapel to pray for peace and reconciliation using the Coventry prayer: "Father forgive."

The 250-bed general hospital is the first in the city to be accredited by a respected independent agency, and is the birthplace of about 1,000 new Dresdeners each year. The deaconesses also care for the elderly and disabled with a wide range of services. There is a kindergarten for the very young and a vocational high school that prepares young adults for work in health care. The deaconesses also sponsor a respected nursing school, whose 170 students follow a three-year program.

### Beatitudes to freedom

In the early 1950s, the border between the Eastern bloc countries, including East Germany, and the West was fortified—not to keep Westerners out, but to keep Easterners from defecting. But by the late 1980s, the GDR was in crisis. Governmental corruption, crackdowns on dissidents, and food shortages led to desperation among the people. In Leipzig, the church of St. Nicholas added discussions on surviving in the GDR to its regular Monday evening prayer meetings, and people began to come by the hundreds.

These meetings inside the church walls were the only place

where people could speak openly. Other churches opened their doors for the same kind of meetings, and soon enough the churches were filled every Monday evening, with thousands of others standing outside holding candles, all calling for reform and praying for peace. The unnerved government officials began sending spies to infiltrate the meetings. This is what they heard:

**Jesus said:** "Blessed are the poor," and not "Happy are the wealthy."

**Jesus said:** "Love your enemies," and not "Down with your opponents."

**Jesus said:** "Many who are now first will be last," and not "Everything stays the same."

**Jesus said:** "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose her life for my sake shall find it," and not "Be very careful."

**Jesus said:** "You are the salt," and not "You are the cream."

Every Monday evening, the people inside the churches would come out to meet the thousands of others holding candles outside and they would all march through the city, calling for change. Troops surrounded the marchers but the demonstrators chanted, "No violence, no violence." In October 1989, the thousands of peaceful protesters

encircled the city of Leipzig and then marched to the headquarters of the dreaded Stasi secret police. There was no response. The government knew it had lost. Before long, party leaders resigned their posts. Free elections were held. And then the Wall fell and the world changed.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

### Reform and hope

Back in the early 1500s, Duke Friedrich of Saxony decided that his neighbors would think more of him if his duchy had a university. Among the monks who came to teach at the duke's new university was Martin Luther. And we know what happened then.

Martin Luther, a penniless, powerless monk, saw that the system around him had become corrupt and oppressive. He called for reform, drawing the wrath of the powerful.

In Wittenberg, we prayed in the Castle Church where Luther preached. We sang his best-known hymn around his grave. We visited Castle Wartburg, the mighty fortress where he carried out that great work of translation. We prayed with the Lutheran sisters in the Augustinerkloster where Luther made his vows as a monk, and with the Roman Catholic sisters at Kloster Helfta whose chapel houses an altar made of stones brought to Helfta by all the congregations, both Protes-

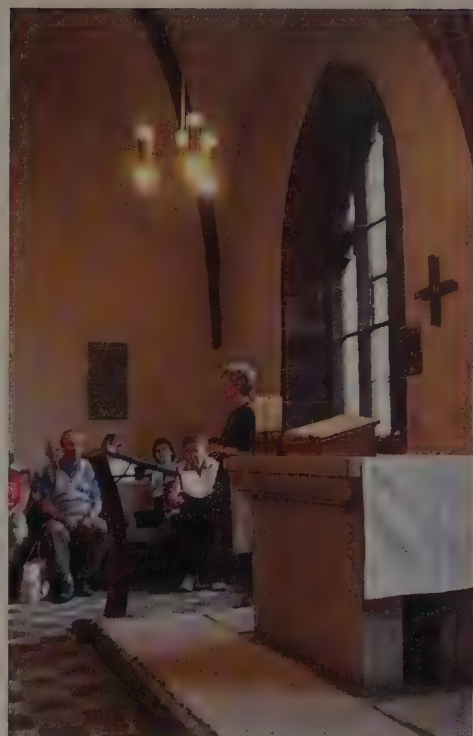
tant and Catholic, for miles around.

*Semper reformanda*, always reforming, always in need of reform. We saw so many signs of reform, reconciliation, and hope in our travels in the footsteps of Martin Luther. What signs of reform and hope do you see in your own travels? In your own town? In your own congregation? What do you see that is in need of reform? How would you call for a peaceful revolution?

### About the trip

The pilgrims on this trip were from all over the country: New York to California, Minnesota to Florida. They ranged in age from about 40 to over 80. Most were seasoned travelers, and several had lived in Germany. There were three mother-daughter pairs among the group, a pair of mothers-in-law (mother of the bride and mother of the groom), and several married couples. There was a group of six from the same congregation. Several pastors were among the travelers, and one seminary professor. Many were planning to make a presentation on the trip to their congregations later. All found the tour to be an inspiring, even life-changing event.

The ELCA Wittenberg Center coordinated with Christian Tours and Women of the ELCA to make all the arrangements. To learn more about the ELCA Wittenberg Center, go to [www.elca.org/witten](http://www.elca.org/witten)



Top: The Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt is now home to Lutheran sisters.

Bottom: The Diaconal Community in Dresden makes more than a million wafers of communion bread each year.

berg. To read a blog of the trip and view some wonderful photos, see [www.20thanniversarytour.blogspot.com](http://www.20thanniversarytour.blogspot.com). 🌿

Deborah Bogaert is director for communications, Women of the ELCA. Audrey Novak Riley is associate editor of this magazine.

To mark the 20th anniversary of Women of the ELCA with a gift, go to [www.womenoftheelca.org/20years/projects.html](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/20years/projects.html).



# Are you living in CHAOS?

by Susan Greeley

## What advice would you give my friend?

She's notably distraught and when I ask, "What's wrong?" all her pent-up frustration comes pouring out.

"It's this relationship. It's going from bad to worse and I don't know what to do. You know how I never have anyone over anymore? I'm so embarrassed by our place—it's a mess. And it's not me who stays home all day cluttering it up. But I'm the one stuck with all the housework. I feel like I'm suffocating!"

She leans in, her voice low and angry. "And we all know I'm the only one with a job in this house. I bring in the money but guess where it goes! You got it! What am I going to do?"

To me the answer is obvious: "You deserve better than this. Throw the bum out!"

What would you tell her?

Would your advice change if you realized that my friend isn't talking about her love life at all, but rather about all the clutter and "stuff" in her life?

## Confession

Okay, I admit it. There is no "friend." Only me, and lots of people like me, trying to come to terms with 50 years of accumulated stuff.

If my case were more severe, the mental health profession could probably offer me some respite. Compulsive hoarding syndrome is the clinical diagnosis of a serious, treatable illness. I'm not that far along. So far at least, I don't live with narrow pathways

through the house and old newspapers piled to the ceiling.

Still, when I was single, I gave my girlfriends a clear directive: "If I'm ever in an accident, do not go to the hospital. Go to the condo and get it straightened up before my mother (or the Health Department) gets there!"

Then there's the refrigerator magnet my husband thinks was written with me in mind: *My original plan called for having a maid.*

Those of you who don't know what I'm talking about can stop reading here. You are the kind of person for whom things are just things. It makes no sense to you that a person could be in a relationship with inanimate objects. You are the fortunate souls who live unencumbered by stuff.

This article is for those of us who, like me, live with things that have nagging little voices of their own:

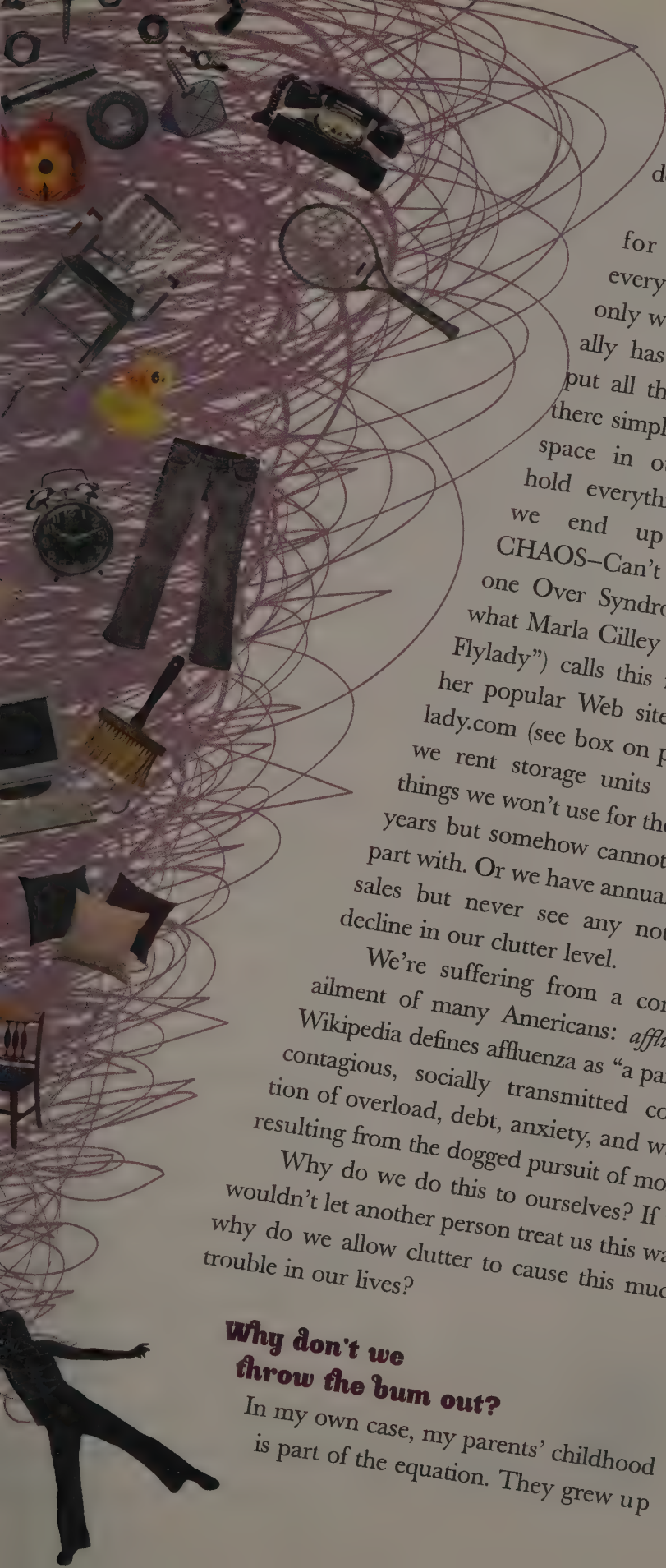
"You can't get rid of me—I was a gift from Aunt Alice."

"I know I'm stained and chipped but I still work, more or less."

"You'll be thin enough to wear me again some day."

"If you throw me out I'll end up in a landfill someplace, ruining the environment."

Then there are the other voices in your head, the ones from childhood:



"Waste not, want not." during the Great Depression and were forever influenced by that trauma. Frugality was carried to the extreme. Certain things were too good to be used for everyday. Other things were too good to be thrown away. After my mother moved out of her home and into an assisted living facility, my sister and I found wedding presents she'd been given in the '40s, still in the original boxes, never used.

This scarcity mentality has been passed on to a generation for whom it has little basis in reality. Many of us don't really need or want all the stuff in our homes but we feel guilty about getting rid of it. Couple that with our inheriting the family heirlooms that our parents couldn't part with, and we're drowning in stuff.

### The Wellness Wheel

The idea of a wellness wheel was suggested first by Dr. Bill Hettler as a way to look at a person's entire wellbeing. It consists of six equal parts: spiritual, occupational, physical, social, intellectual, and emotional. A healthy person strives to maintain balance in her life by spending an equal amount of energy in each area.

I made some interesting discoveries when I started to look at my stuff through the lens of the wellness wheel. It seems clutter can have a deleterious effect on all aspects of our health. Take a look:

**Spiritual.** Take time to give

"Use it up. Wear it out. Make it do or do without." But "a place for everything and everything in its place" only works if one actually has somewhere to put all this stuff. When there simply isn't enough space in our homes to hold everything we own, we end up living in CHAOS—Can't Have Any one Over Syndrome. That's what Marla Cilley (alias "The Flylady") calls this malady on her popular Web site, [www.flylady.com](http://www.flylady.com) (see box on p. 25). Or we rent storage units to house things we won't use for the next 10 years but somehow cannot bear to part with. Or we have annual garage sales but never see any noticeable decline in our clutter level.

We're suffering from a common ailment of many Americans: *affluenza*. Wikipedia defines *affluenza* as "a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more."

Why do we do this to ourselves? If we wouldn't let another person treat us this way, why do we allow clutter to cause this much trouble in our lives?

### Why don't we throw the bum out?

In my own case, my parents' childhood is part of the equation. They grew up



significant thought to the Bible study in this issue of *LWT*. It speaks far more eloquently than I can about the spiritual dangers of our possessions. Don't hang on to things because you "might need them someday." Trust that God will provide if you need something in the future.

**Occupational.** If you are having trouble coping with clutter at home, chances are good that the situation isn't much better at the office. Papers pile up. You can't find the receipts to fill out your expense report. Or the situation at home spills over into the job: You're coming in late because you can't find your keys or you had to return the overdue library book.

**Physical.** This is no joke, especially as people age. Have you ever tripped over something that shouldn't have been there in the first place? Having piles of things on the stairs can be dangerous, especially at night. As we age we lose strength and stamina, making it harder for us to get rid of the clutter even if we make up our minds to do so.

**Social.** If there's an unexpected knock on the door, do you pretend you're not home so no one will see the state of your living room? Do your kids want to play at their friend's house but are embarrassed by their own?

Having too much stuff around can cause you to feel guilty and ashamed. Even worse, it leads to

isolation and loneliness. Are you going to let clutter stand in the way of your loving relationships?

**Emotional.** This is the area of our lives where clutter seems to do the most obvious damage. Pick almost any negative emotion and clutter will make it worse.

Guilt: "I have all this stuff when others have nothing."

Inadequacy: "Why can't I be more organized?"

Shame: "Other people don't live like this. Why do I?"

Anger: "Why have I let this get so out of hand?"

Depression: "It's no use. I'll never get out from under all this stuff."

**Intellectual.** It's not easy to read, think, or develop new ideas when you're surrounded and distracted by clutter. It's also tempting to buy every book published about organizing your life, thus adding still more clutter to your bookshelves.

But your intellectual self may well be your best ally in helping to reframe the problem. Before you spend another \$50 at the Container Store in another futile attempt to conquer your clutter, try using your intellect to view your stuff differently.

Change the conversation with your possessions:

"Thank you for the good memories you've brought me of Aunt Alice. Now I want you to do the same for someone else. That's why you're going to live with cousin Teresa."

"You've lived a long and useful life and now it's time to join the other chipped and stained objects that have gone before you."

"I hope I will be thin enough to wear you again someday. Sadly by then you'll be long out of style so I'm going to give you to someone who can wear you right now."

"Yes, it's true. You may end up in a landfill. But at least you won't be turning this house into a landfill!"

## Wisdom of the Ages

If you're still struggling to gain a different perspective on your possessions, try looking at them through the wisdom of the ages:

Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise. (Jesus, Luke 3:11)

The wise man does not lay up treasure. The more he gives to others, the more he has for his own. (Lao-tsze, *The Simple Way*)

An object in possession never retains the same charms it had in pursuit. (Pliny the Elder)

Any possession beyond the needful is a burden. (Publilius Syrus)

To know how to do without is to possess. (J.F. Regnard)

The man who dies rich, dies disgraced. (Andrew Carnegie)

Wealth is a good servant, a very bad mistress. (Francis Bacon)

It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more

that is poor. (Seneca)

A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone. (Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*)

Riches get their value from the mind of their possessor; they are blessings to those who know how to use them, curses to those who do not. (Terence)

For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? (Jesus, Matthew 16:26a)

## Finding balance

No matter how hard we try to maintain balance in our lives, we all have one part of the wellness wheel where we're most comfortable and where we spend a majority of our time. If the intellectual aspect of your life isn't speaking to your problem of clutter, maybe the Holy Spirit is nudging your spiritual self to deal with it. Maybe related problems at work or with your relationships will cause your occupational or social natures to tackle your clutter. It may be the sheer physical limits of space and energy that will force a change.

If all else fails, let loose the power of your emotional self. Get mad! Go back to my friend's story about her rotten relationship and treat your clutter as you would an obnoxious hanger-on: Throw the bum out! 🌸

**Susan Greeley** is the producer/director of *Grace Matters*, the radio ministry of the ELCA.

## Tips to help you de-clutter

1. Notice how a particular object makes you feel. Does it bring back painful or embarrassing memories? If so, get it out of the house. Surround yourself only with things that make you smile every time you see them.

2. If an object brings back good memories but is no longer of any practical use to you, take a picture of it and give the object away. The picture will bring the same memories while taking up much less space.

3. Speaking of pictures: Make the jump to digital and store them on the computer. Bring old photos you no longer want to family reunions and pass them on to your extended family. Make a date with yourself (and keep it!) to start putting your remaining photos into albums. Don't continue to deceive yourself by thinking you'll get around to it "someday."

4. Go through the mail every day, throwing out as much paper as possible before setting it down.

5. Stop buying books. You already pay taxes to support your local library: Make good use of it.

6. Say "yes!" every time you get a call from the Salvation Army or a similar organization asking for donations.

Make a concerted effort to donate at least 10 items each time.

7. Stop buying things for other people that aren't useful. This is particularly true for older relatives and friends. As my father used to say, "If I have to feed it, paint it, or dust it, I don't want it!" Instead, give practical gifts like stamps, gift cards from the grocery store, or a coupon for a dinner out. Better still, give them something no one can buy: your time and attention.

## Resources

**[www.flylady.com](http://www.flylady.com)**

Marla Cilley, alias "the Flylady," helps you overcome CHAOS: Can't Have Anyone Over Syndrome. She's also written a popular book on the subject called *Sink Reflections*.

**[www.freecycle.net](http://www.freecycle.net)**

An entirely free, nonprofit network of people who give (and get) stuff for free in their own towns. Go on-line to join or start a network in your community.

**[www.simpleliving.org](http://www.simpleliving.org)**

Suggestions for Christians who want to reduce their consumption and fight affluenza.

***Sustaining Simplicity: A Journal***

by Anne Basye, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2007; [www.elca.org/hunger/simple](http://www.elca.org/hunger/simple).





## BIBLE STUDY

BLESSED TO FOLLOW: THE BEATITUDES  
AS A COMPASS FOR DISCIPLESHIP

### SESSION 2

# Poor in Spirit, Rich in Blessing

by Martha E. Stortz

See a video clip of author Martha E. Stortz  
introducing Session 2 of this Bible study at  
[www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org).

The Bible study has a blog! Check out  
[www.lwtmagazine.blogspot.com](http://www.lwtmagazine.blogspot.com).

## Theme verses

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3)

## Opening

Hymn "My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 251; *With One Voice* 730

## Prayer

Gracious God,  
you are the Giver of every good gift;  
you have held nothing back from us,  
even giving us your Son;  
you adopt us as sons and daughters  
in the body of your Son, Christ Jesus.  
Unburden us of everything that keeps us from you,  
and unclench our hands that  
we might lift them in praise and blessing.  
We ask this in the name of your dear Son, Jesus.  
Amen.

## Introduction

"You'd give away the shirt off your back," one of the locker-room buddies teased another. "But then you'd be arrested for creating a public disturbance." We took stock of Susan's ample figure—and burst out laughing. Susan laughed loudest, as generous with her laughter as with her clothes. As we got into our cars after water aerobics class, Susan rumbled away in a wreck that had seen at least a decade on the road, while the rest of us hopped into the latest models that Detroit or Tokyo had to offer. Susan had less than any of us. She rented a small apartment, lived on a teacher's salary—and we saw her bathing suits sag after seasons of use. Yet Susan lived with an abundance that contrasted sharply with her friends' anxiety over making ends meet. She lived a life poor in material goods—but rich in blessing. She lived as if she had already inherited her piece of the kingdom.

Matthew's Gospel blesses "the poor in spirit," while Luke bluntly names "you who are poor" (Luke 6:20). Is there a difference? Scholars debate what kind of poverty is at stake in this Beatitude: material or spiritual. Is Matthew qualifying Luke's clear commitment to material poverty? If Matthew is talking about spiritual poverty, what does that mean?

*Poverty* in any sense of the word does not seem like much of a blessing. Yet the promise of the "kingdom of heaven" describes a stunning reversal of earthly fortunes, as both Mary's and Hannah's songs attest. What is going on with Jesus' blessing?

This session explores the blessing and promise attached to poverty by inviting us to see how our possessions possess us. Then we turn to the biblical models of poverty, meeting Jesus as one who is both poor and poor in spirit. His kingship invites disciples into the kingdom of heaven. Because we serve this King of Love, Jesus' lot will be ours. The apostle Paul has his own song, a Magnificat for every disciple. Finally, we look at generosity as a practice that invites us to live into the blessing: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

### **Possessed by our Possessions**

Words from Mount Sinai state the biggest threat to Christian generosity: "I am the LORD your God . . . ; you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3). The commandment referred to the various gods and goddesses that were worshiped around the ancient world. But we're fooling ourselves if we think that idols are a thing of the past. If we rummage through our anxiety closets, we find plenty that threatens to enthrall us.

- 1. What are some "idols" you know about in your time and place? Your town? Your home?**
- 2. What would be difficult for you to give up if you were asked to drop everything and follow Jesus?**

Martin Luther located these other gods by following our heartstrings: "That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is . . . really your God" ("The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, Fortress, 1959, p. 365). Our possessions tug at us, and we stand toe to toe with the great biblical worrywarts: "Will thieves make off with my profit?" "Will the stock market uptick or downturn?" There are even questions with some trappings of spirituality: "Will people like me?" "Do I spend enough time in prayer?" "Is the glass half-empty or half-full most of the time?" God does not want us to waste time measuring. Anxiety turns the heart in on itself (*cor incurvatus in se*), transforming possessions into gods.

Jesus knew all too well the power of possessions to enthrall. For this reason he opens his first sermon with the words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." He knew that people become possessed by their possessions.

- 3. If your house were burning, if the hill behind you was sliding, if the floodwaters were rising, and you had to leave immediately, what would you grab to take away with you? What would be in your hands?**

The most graphic healings in the New Testament involve demonic possession. Jesus threw out the demons inhabiting a Gerasene man, and the spirits moved into a herd of pigs, stampeding them into the sea (Mark 5:1-13). In casting out the demons, Jesus literally re-possessed the man, claiming him for his rightful owner. Such healing stories teach us *who* we really are by showing us *whose* we really are. (See article on page 22.)

When we gather in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we testify to whom we rightfully belong. The apostle Paul phrased this new membership like this: "you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Corinthians 3:23). Through



our baptism we are grafted onto the body of Christ. Through him, we already set one foot into the kingdom of heaven. The only way to continue the journey is with open hands, ready to receive the gifts and the guidance offered us. (See article on page 6.)

### **Songs for the Journey**

***Think about a song, religious or secular, that represents the details of your life. Are you satisfied with that song or would you prefer another? If so, how would it go? What song would you like to represent your life as the Christian you hope and strive to be?***

Once I visited a congregation where I had never worshiped before. Praying with eyes closed and hands jammed into my pockets, I felt a hand on my shoulder. The practice of this community was to hold hands during the Lord's Prayer. Finding no hand to hold, my neighbor had simply laid her hand on my shoulder to include me. I quickly dug out my hands, opened them to receive the hands of neighbors on both sides, and stepped into the circle of prayer.

No one can enter a circle of prayer with their hands buried deep in their pockets, and no one can give or receive anything with their hands clenched around their possessions. Martin Luther understood this on his deathbed. Before he died, he said, "We are all beggars." Luther left his friends with the image of open hands. Poverty loosens our hold on possessions, freeing us for the journey of discipleship.

We only enter the kingdom of heaven with open hands. As we journey, we sing the songs of our foremothers, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Their songs tell stories of amazing reversal: the poor becoming rich, the lowly lifted up, the mighty knocked from their thrones. These are songs of the kingdom of heaven, where God alone rules. And the songs come from the lips of women

whose hands had been forced open by circumstance. They had nothing to cling to but God. As we listen, their songs become ours.

### **4. Have you seen such reversals of fortune—the poor becoming rich, the lowly lifted up, the mighty knocked down—in your own life? How are such things possible?**

### **Mary's Song**

#### **READ THE MAGNIFICAT (LUKE 1:46–55).**

Put yourself in Mary's sandals. She is young, female, pregnant, unmarried, and adrift in a world that prizes a woman's chastity. She is engaged to be married to a man who knows the child she bears does not belong to him. The Gospel of Matthew tersely reports the situation: "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly" (1:19). We can only imagine what Mary's future might have held.

To this point the only person Mary had discussed her shocking situation with is an angel—and Gabriel wasn't particularly pastoral. But the angel did point her to her cousin Elizabeth, a relative who was also impossibly pregnant. Elizabeth offered Mary the first consolation she had known, and that consolation came with words of blessing: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42). With open hands and open arms, Elizabeth embraced her. Mary responded with praise of a God whose ways are as mysterious as they are gracious. "My soul magnifies the Lord. . . ."

Mary sings of how God has reversed her fortune. Her "lowliness" becomes something "all generations will call . . . blessed." She moves from her situation to speak of all the lowly, and her song sounds a lot like Jesus' first sermon. Mary uttered the Beatitudes before Jesus was even born! The blessings of her pregnancy echo down the centuries.

5. *How did God unburden Mary?*
6. *And what did God put in her hands?*

## **Hannah's Song**

**READ THE PRAYER OF HANNAH (1 SAMUEL 2:1-10).**

Mary's song of praise repeats an older song from another unlikely mother. Hannah was barren, a condition that brought ridicule and risk upon her. Women without children had no one to care for them in their old age. Children were their Social Security system, their hedge against starvation. The Old Testament makes particular provision for widows, as we see from the story of Ruth, whose first husband had died, leaving her childless. Landowners let widows glean grain on the edges of the field. It was their only hope of survival.

Hannah turned her firstborn over to the Lord, consecrating him for service. But her legacy is greater than her progeny, for she leaves us a song that served as the model for Mary's Magnificat. Her song, like Mary's, praises God and promises the reversal of fortune for all who trust in the Lord.

In conceiving that longed-for child, Hannah joins the many other biblical women who conceived later in life: Sarah (Genesis 17:15-19), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21-26), Rachel (Genesis 29:31), the mother of Samson (Judges 13:2-5), and Mary's cousin, Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-17).

7. *How did God unburden Hannah?*
8. *And what did God put in her hands?*

*You might write about the following questions in your journal or, if time allows, discuss them together.*

*Think of one incident in your life that seemed a curse at the outset and later turned into a blessing. How did it start and how did it turn out? What or who changed the curse into a blessing?*

*Think of an incident in your life that seemed a blessing at the outset and later turned into a curse. How did it start and how did it turn out? What or who changed the blessing into a curse?*

9. *How does God unburden you?*
10. *What is God putting in your hands?*
11. *What song describes your life?*

## **Jesus: The King of Love**

Both of these hymns of our foremothers sing of a kingdom that seems to be the mirror image of the world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The kingdom of heaven reverses people's fortunes, and Hannah's song praises its ruler:

"The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;  
he will give strength to his king,  
and exalt the power of his anointed."  
(1 Samuel 2:10b)

Jesus was not the kind of king people expected. Mark's Gospel (Mark 8:27-33) says it all. Jesus asked the disciples: "Who do people say that I am?" They reply: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. The disciples' answers replay the temptation in the wilderness: Elijah's appearance in the Temple precincts preceded the day of salvation; Moses, the greatest of the prophets, brought food from heaven and water out of rocks; John the Baptist announced that the "kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2). When Jesus posed the question to those who knew him best, Peter responded with another wrong answer. "The Messiah" would fight with military might to restore the promised land to the chosen people.

12. *Who do you say Jesus is? What is the picture of Jesus hanging on that Sunday school classroom in the back of your head? Has that picture changed over the years?*



**13. If this is who Jesus is, what does that mean for you as a disciple?**

Jesus began to teach about a different kind of king, a Son of Man who would suffer, be rejected, killed, and raised from the dead. More importantly, he showed disciples then and now that he was the one to whom all the Beatitudes point. The one who blesses is the one who is “poor in spirit” and “pure in heart,” who mourns and makes peace, who is merciful and meek, who is persecuted to death for his goodness.

Jesus’ kingdom confounded people: Some could not stand his humility; others resisted that bright goodness. Matthew’s Gospel highlights the kingdom; it spends a lot of time with its king. The passion narrative in particular reveals the confusion this kind of king created. More than any of the other Gospel accounts, Matthew portrays a king’s poverty. Jesus had no one to serve him and no one to save him. He faced death alone, a leader without followers, a king without servants. Listen to the taunts flung at Jesus from the crowd; imagine how they must have sounded to this King of Love:

“This is Jesus, the King of the Jews” (27:37).

“You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself!” (27:40)

“He saved others; he cannot save himself” (27:42).

“He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him” (27:42).

“He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son’” (27:43).

If you have a Bible with the words of Christ in red, look at how silent Jesus becomes as the passion grinds toward his death. The red lines become fewer and farther between. Jesus becomes more and more silent. He is poor—even in speech. Matthew records Jesus’ final and only words from the cross as: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (27:46)

Yet, when the risen Christ returned, he greeted the disciples with the words “Do not be afraid.” Love conquers death; the Spirit of God in Christ rescues us from the undertow of evil and from the burden of our possessions.

What does it mean to serve this kind of king? The answer terrified Jesus’ disciples. As we have seen, they had hoped that Jesus was the kind of king who would rise up with military might and reclaim the Promised Land for God’s chosen people. Then they could be generals in the army of liberation. But if Jesus was the king of love, what did this mean for them?

Peter put the question to Jesus directly: “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (Matthew 19:27) The disciples would have more than enough: They would have love, because in Jesus, they had known Love itself. When Peter asked this question, Jesus had just ended a conversation with a rich young man—and ended it abruptly (Matthew 19:16–22; also Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30). The man surely had more possessions than the whole lot of disciples put together. In addition, he knew the law to the letter. One thing he did not know: how to unburden himself from his possessions. He was a man possessed, and even Jesus could not cast out these demons.

**Discipleship: Paul’s Song about Following a King of Love**

The apostle Paul offered a song to rally the troops: Corinth was one of the biggest and most important cities of the ancient world, and we imagine that Paul’s community there was sophisticated. They considered themselves “rich in spirit,” and Paul struggled with some of the gifted and charismatic leaders among them. Lacing his letter with irony, Paul contrasted the wealth and arrogance of people rich in spiritual and material gifts with the lot of discipleship. He closed with a rhetorical question that revealed his affection

for the community: “Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Corinthians 4:21) This is what it means to follow a king of love.

**READ 1 CORINTHIANS 4:9–13.**

**14. Have you ever been “a spectacle to the world” or faced persecution or slander for following Jesus?**

### **Practice: Generosity**

Generosity has a way of unclenching our hands and allowing us to reach out to our neighbor. An old preacher exhorted his congregation: “I want you to give until it hurts. And then I want you give until it stops hurting!” After listening to him preach like this Sunday after Sunday, these folks got used to diving into their pockets. After a while, they didn’t think twice about it. By then the preacher’s command was a disposition etched deeply on their hearts. Generosity is God’s way of unclenching our hands, freeing us from our possessions.

Think back on Susan, the woman who’d give you the shirt off her back. I suspect Jesus had Susan in mind when he said: “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Matthew 25:29). Jesus makes no punishing divine prediction; rather, he states a simple fact. A generous person feels overwhelmed with abundance. She is free to share her possessions. In contrast, the ungenerous person feels underwhelmed with what she has. In her mind, her possessions are under constant siege. She lives in a state of scarcity, and she hoards what little she has, lest “even what she has be taken away.”

Generosity is the gift that keeps on giving. In seeing generosity as a practice of discipleship, we are freed *from* our possessions and freed *for* belonging to Christ.

## **Closing**

### **Prayer**

Holy Jesus,  
You have cast out our demons;  
you have freed us from what binds us.  
You continue to reach out to us  
in blessing and in love;  
we belong to you, sisters in the family  
of the children of God.  
Make us as generous with our gifts  
as you have been in giving them.  
Help us to reach out to others with open hands,  
so that we may be your hands in a world  
that longs for your embrace.  
We ask today that you hold especially  
in your embrace the following people:  
(pause for names to be spoken)  
We ask this through your Holy Spirit,  
who descended upon those first disciples  
in tongues of fire,  
who descends upon us still.  
Amen.

**Hymn** “The King of Love My Shepherd Is,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 502; *Lutheran Book of Worship* 456

### **Looking ahead: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”**

Some people cut their losses—and move forward. But those who find a way to live alongside their losses mourn. Jesus promises comfort to all who mourn. As you prepare your heart for the next Beatitude, look at the losses in your own life. Whom do you mourn? Write their names in your blessings journal. Were you comforted as you mourned that loss? If so, by whom? When have you comforted others? 🌿

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# *A Poor Man's Wealth*

by Bryan M. Cones



For years my mother's front flowerbed has been adorned with a single statue: A simple little monk with a characteristic tonsured haircut standing—you guessed it—in a birdbath! Even in my largely Southern Baptist Tennessee hometown, Francis of Assisi occupies many a front yard, serenely presiding over the birds to whom legend claims he

once preached, admonishing them to be thankful for the plumage and the food God provided them. (The legend says they all stayed and listened to the whole sermon.) "Look at the birds of the air," Jesus told his disciples (Matthew 6:26); Francis took him seriously.

That same Francis of Assisi has found a home among Christians of

many denominations. His feast day on October 4 finds churches filled with pets of every kind—including some who don't always get along! Such a gathering is surely appropriate for a man who named every creature, indeed the entire natural world, his brother or sister, once even persuading "Brother Wolf" to stop eating the local townspeople.

Yet for all his popularity and for all the stories that endear him to us, it can be easy to miss the challenge of Francis, who can teach us about much more than love for animals. After all, Francis took profoundly to heart one of the most basic of Jesus' teachings: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). Or, as Luke bluntly puts it, "Blessed are you who are poor" (6:20). Indeed, it is for his poverty that Francis is most well known, and tradition has called him *Il Poverello*, the poor man of Assisi. That poverty has much to teach us today.

### *A man of his time*

Like every person, Francesco Bernardino came from a specific time and place, and his story is best understood in its context. Born in 1181 to a member of the new merchant class—Francis' father Pietro was a successful cloth dealer—Francis was among the nouveau riche of his day, enjoying a lifestyle not unlike that of the upper middle class of our own society. As a young man, he too was often driven by the desire for fame, wealth, and good times that characterizes our own well-heeled young (and not-so-young) people.

Like our own society, medieval Assisi was marked by a vast chasm

between the lives of the wealthy few and the great many desperately poor. So when Francis, who had begun a slow turn from his "work hard, play harder" lifestyle, publicly renounced his father's wealth, it's not hard to imagine everyone's surprise. He famously gave back even the clothing his father had given him—in the town square!

Francis, however, was not alone in choosing poverty. The church of Francis' time had been influenced by the new wealth of growing trade within Europe. Many bishops and other clergy had become quite rich, and they were losing the confidence of common people.

Already around the time of Francis' birth, Peter Waldo, another merchant who renounced wealth, had begun a movement similar to the one Francis would found, an order of mostly lay Christians who embraced poverty and preaching as their mission. The Waldensians, as they came to be called, were eventually condemned as heretics, though their church survives today.

At the same time, the Cathars (also called Albigensians for their French hometown of Albi), a group whose elite members fasted unto death, had also impressed the masses with their detachment from all things material. (*Cathar* is derived from the Greek word meaning pure; their goal was to be pure of anything earthly.) They became so popular

in part of France that church leaders ordered military action, beginning the Albigensian Crusade of the early 13th century.

Francis' own choice of poverty reflected the same hunger for a simpler, gospel-driven Christian life that was growing among believers. Within a few years he had attracted thousands—rich and poor, men and women alike. Francis, however, managed to remain in the good graces of the church of his time, mostly anyway. He resisted ecclesiastical honor as much as any other (he was ordained a deacon only under protest), preaching always the wisdom of Lady Poverty, whom he called his spouse.

When one bishop expressed horror at the extremes of Francis' poverty—after all, Francis ate from the garbage and wore little more than rags—Francis simply replied, "If we had any possessions we should need weapons and laws to defend them." In our own time, in which both individuals and nations battle over finite earthly resources—oil, minerals, even land and water—Francis' wisdom is prophetic.

### *A generous spouse*

Indeed, it seems that one of the many gifts Lady Poverty offered Francis was freedom. Without property to defend, Francis could follow his heart—even recklessly. During the Fifth Crusade against the Mus-



lim kingdoms of the Holy Land, which Francis condemned as brutal and un-Christian, he braved death to preach the gospel to the Egyptian Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. He was sure that if the sultan would accept the gospel, the fighting would end. Though Francis was unsuccessful in converting the sultan, al-Kamil did express admiration for Francis and released him and his companions unharmed. (Who knew that the guy in the birdbath was a pioneer in inter-religious dialogue?) Poverty, it seems, allowed Francis to be the “instrument of peace” he prayed to become in what we now call the Prayer of St. Francis.

But even more than freedom, perhaps, poverty brought Francis humility in its most basic, grounding sense. By living in utter dependence on God, he found oneness not only with the poor of humanity—he kissed lepers and gave even the rags off his back to those in need—but with the whole natural world, with all of God’s creation.

In his Canticle of the Sun, Francis announced not only his love for the natural world but his dependence on it as well: “Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which you give your creatures sustenance. Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure. Be

praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.”

We don’t have to wonder what the man who thanked God for all the weather would say about climate change, or how he might lament the pollution of precious Sister Water or the degradation of Mother Earth. Francis is called the patron of ecology for good reason, and he would no doubt weep over the destruction of the environment as he mourned the deaths of his human sisters and brothers.

### *Patron for what ails us*

And that may be Francis’ great lesson to us: In his poverty he learned what so often we forget. Not only are we as utterly dependent on God as the birds of the air, we are no less tightly woven into the tapestry of creation. We belong to a vast web of created things, each linked to the others, and we, perhaps, need them far more than they need us. Francis reminds us that as we watch the destruction of God’s creation around us, we are watching also our slow demise.

His joyful poverty, too, is a counterpoint to the modern myth that money brings happiness. Our desire to control and consume, to have and hoard, cannot give us the desire of our hearts. Yet *Il Poverello*, who stepped off the 12th-century

version of the materialistic merry-go-round, perhaps lived more fully in his 45 years than some who live to 100—all without owning a thing, except for that nasty rag he called a monk’s habit, which you can see to this day in Assisi.

As he lay dying, it is said that Francis asked his brothers to place him naked into ground, to let his body rest as close as possible to the soil, the *humus* (the root word of “humility”) from which he (and we all) came. In his welcome of “Sister Bodily Death, from whose embrace no living person can escape,” he reminds us that we all go down into the dust with nothing but our faith and the love of those around us. Francis had nothing to cling to and so could praise God.

Though we may never have the courage to wed Lady Poverty ourselves, perhaps we may learn the wisdom of one who did. 🌿

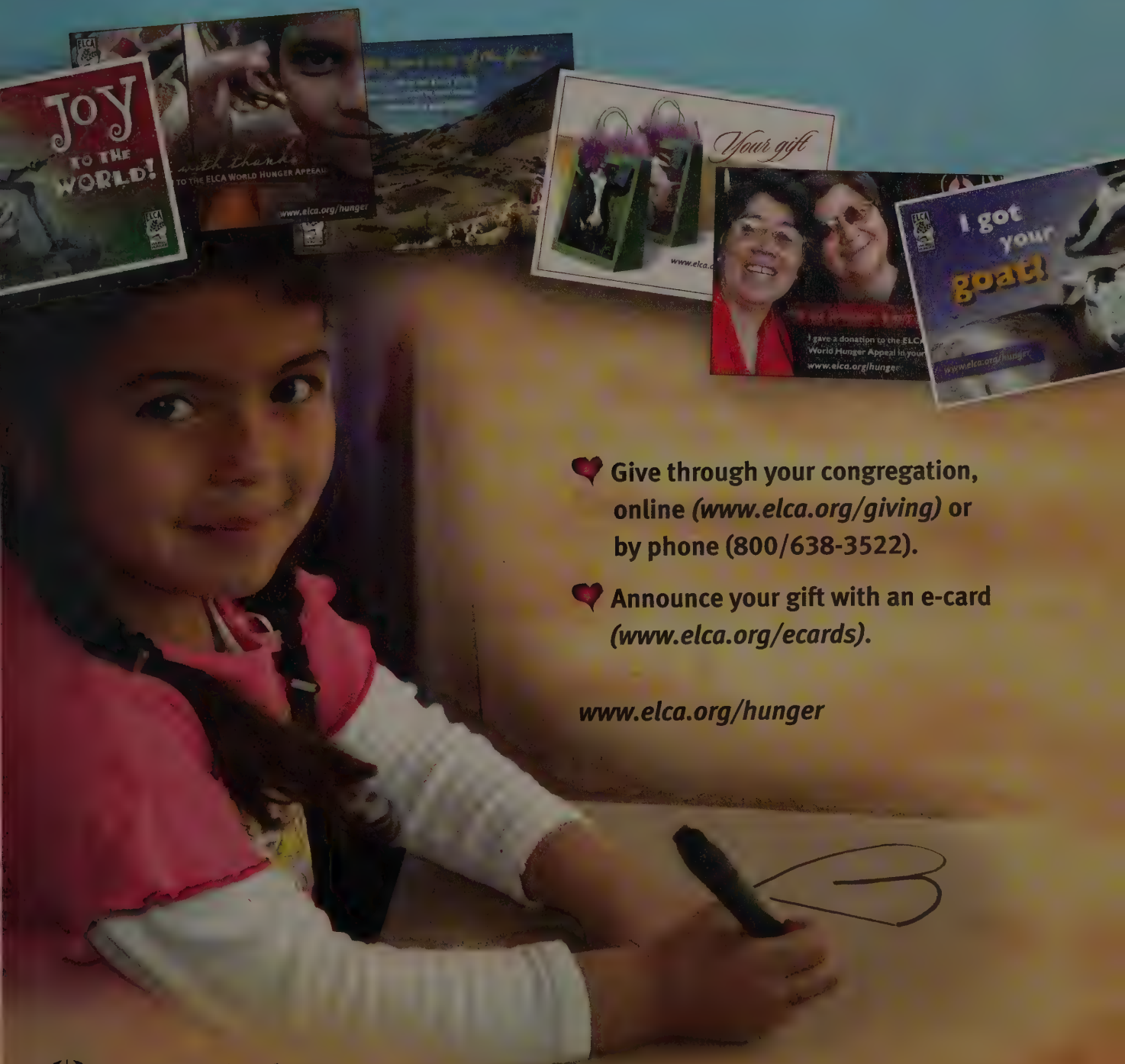
**Bryan M. Cones**, a Chicago writer and editor, holds a master’s degree in theology from Catholic Theological Union at Chicago.

*Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* commemorates Francis of Assisi on October 4. The text of the hymn “All Creatures, Worship God Most High” (*ELW* 835) is based on the Canticle of the Sun, written by Francis. You can read the prayer “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,” attributed to Francis on page 87 of *ELW*.



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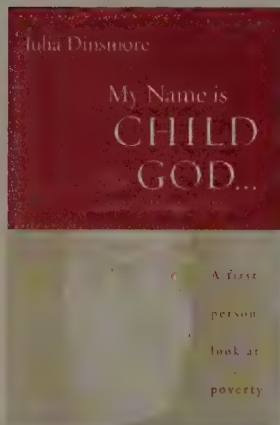


# My Name is Child of God . . .

Not "Those People": A First-Person Look at Poverty

by Julia K. Dinsmore

Augsburg Books, Minneapolis, 2007



Some 37 million Americans live in poverty, according to the 2005 U.S. Census. This is roughly the population of Canada, Julia K. Dinsmore points out in her book, *My Name is Child of God . . . Not "Those People": A First-Person Look at Poverty*.

Who are the poor in America? What does poverty mean, and how does it feel to be poor? Who—or what—is responsible? And what does poverty have to do with us?

Dinsmore's book is less a response to poverty than a bravely personal testament to the what and the who. It is also at times an attack on, at times a prayer for, those who see poverty as a problem that does not include us. In a series of interconnected autobiographical stories, poems, and brief case studies, Dinsmore illustrates how invisible the poor really are in America and how much they suffer.

Her book addresses these questions from the perspective of one who knows the subject of poverty all too well. Dinsmore is a singer, writer, and activist who calls herself a product of generational poverty and has lived in poverty as a single mother.

In the early '90s, Dinsmore wrote a poem in response to a meeting between a welfare mothers' group seeking support to purchase a home and church financiers. During the meeting, someone commented, "Those people don't need homes . . . we give them turkeys at Christmas and Thanksgiving." The poem, "My Name is Not Those People," explained that after paying rent each month, she had \$36 plus \$169 in food stamps for her three children. Their father, who had left the family, did not pay child support. The poem made Dinsmore a celebrity among those who study poverty and helped empower her to become an activist.

## Broken social systems

While I was reading this book, the city of Berkeley fired its entire housing authority staff for the mismanagement of \$25 million in federal funding. Among other violations, this office, responsible for running

the subsidized housing program, was found to be paying rent to landlords for tenants who are dead.

One of the main themes in Dinsmore's book is how great the need for affordable housing is in America, and how American communities fail to acknowledge this. Her larger theme is how many of our social systems are run incompetently or exhibit bias. For example, she points out that most waiting lists for subsidized housing are so long that new applications are received only one day each year. She also writes that the number of released prisoners who return behind bars correlates with the lack of low-income housing and that reading scores of third-graders are used to plan the capacity of future prisons.

*My Name* describes America's dichotomous orientation toward our citizens—we live as "us" and "them." We have a class system, and those at the bottom are severely oppressed. Yet most of us are largely unaware of how this works.

Dinsmore describes how trapped many Americans are. We support a system that is geared toward maintaining the status quo or pursuing excellence, most importantly, one's own. How many news outlets regu-

larly address the college admissions crunch and how many covered the story of the Berkeley housing authority? Unfortunately for the poor, the words *achievement, education, opportunity, upward mobility, homeowner, college graduate, and middle class* have little meaning. Mistakenly many Americans have convinced themselves that because of the country's overall wealth, we are all middle class.

Dinsmore's story is not without its anger, despair, and outrage. You learn about her family history and her experience as a single mother navigating state welfare and medical systems. While growing up as the oldest of six in South Minneapolis, Dinsmore suffered abuse and insecurity. Her mother was subject to violent rages and spent long periods in state mental hospitals. Dinsmore's father was an alcoholic who left the family. Despite this, Dinsmore went to college, studied in Denmark, and worked on a kibbutz in Israel. However, she eventually failed out of college.

In later life she has struggled with illness: her own and that of her sons—two of three have mental disorders. Dinsmore has had to fight for medical care for her sons. She laments a system that forced her to sell the family car because its value put her over the asset limit for state medical care. Dinsmore had been

working and supporting her family, but could not afford health insurance. The same system repeatedly pressured her to give up custody of her children so that, as wards of the state, they would be entitled to full medical care.

### Despair and strength

Dinsmore eventually learns that her former home was heavily contaminated with arsenic. She wonders how this has affected her sons and expresses despair at how her family's life is continually threatened despite her best efforts. But Dinsmore also exhibits strength; she describes a turning point when she realizes that her situation is not a matter of her failure. She explains the moment when she finally stopped blaming herself for her poverty, for not being "smart enough" to get through college, "strong enough" to work two or three jobs, "good enough" to deserve a safe neighborhood, good schools, or medical care for her children, for not being able to "bear the workload" of a single parent.

As she recounts her interactions with social support systems, she points out hypocrisies and the ways that many of our systems for helping the poor are illogical and humiliating. She also points out that there are other ways. For example, Dinsmore praises a food ministry in Wichita that does not simply

give food to the poor. The Lord's Diner is a creative enterprise where local cooks donate their time to run a buffet restaurant that is entirely free and welcomes all. "It may sound like a trivial afterthought to consider social atmosphere when talking about something as basic as the need to eat," Dinsmore writes. "Any attempt to preserve the dignity of those of us suffering is far from trivial."

Dinsmore's moments of despair and outrage are not surprising. What is shocking, to those of us who are not aware of what it means to live in poverty, is how, despite her suffering and struggle, Dinsmore's outlook remains one of defiance, strength, and hope. She has now joined a statewide project initiated by the ELCA to end poverty in Minnesota by 2020. And she believes it can be done. Toward the end of *My Name*, Dinsmore quotes another disenfranchised person, an Australian aboriginal woman: "If you have come to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine . . . then let us work together." 🌸

**Kate Steilen** is a writer living in East Palo Alto, Calif.

To read Dinsmore's poem, "My Name is Not Those People," visit the Web site: [depts.loras.edu/scw/poem.html](http://depts.loras.edu/scw/poem.html).



# Thanking God for 20 Years

by Emily Hansen



Women of the ELCA has a long-standing tradition of gathering to give God thanks and praise in a Thankoffering service. This year, as we observe the 20th anniversary of the organization, we have an extra prayer to offer—for our ministry to continue as long as God can use us.

Our purpose statement asks us to support one another in our callings and engage in ministry and action. It is also a part of our purpose to provide assistance to others through our offerings and help others recognize their own power through stewardship.

It is through the resources, events, global education opportunities, grants, and scholarships that the purpose and mission of Women of the ELCA have been most clearly demonstrated. It is through the work of stewardship and serving others

that we have seen what an organization like Women of the ELCA can do. We have seen its witness for peace and justice among women and its commitment to women's spiritual and physical health.

Women of the ELCA Thankofferings support the total outreach of the ELCA, including specific programs of the women's organization. As we celebrate our 20th anniversary, you might consider giving 20 dollars.

From the Women of the  
ELCA 2007—2008

Thankoffering Service

*Prayers of Intercession*

**Leader:** With the whole people of Christ Jesus, let us call upon God for the sake of the church, the world, and all who are in need of prayer.

*A brief silence is kept.*

**L:** Leader    **C:** Congregation

**L:** For all those who call upon God in faith and devotion in any language and by any name, that all peoples of the world may live freely to express their faith, we pray:

**C:** We have freely received; may we likewise freely give.

**L:** For the ministry of the whole church, that our offerings may be used to strengthen those working to relieve suffering and injustice around the world remembering that we are all made equal in the image of God, we pray:

**C:** We have freely received; may we likewise freely give.

**L:** Creator God, we thank you for your gifts of good soil, clean air, and crops gathered throughout our land. We pray for those who this day have

**EDITOR'S NOTE** For many years, ELCA congregations would receive a fall mailing from Women of the ELCA that included the Stewardship Planning Guide with a variety of resources to help groups prepare and plan effective ministries. This year, the packet—which will include the Stewardship Guide, a Thankoffering Service, and the Devotions—will be mailed only to congregations that have an active Women of the ELCA unit. In this issue, as we explore how we can live with generosity and open hands, we are printing excerpts from these resources that you can use in your Bible study circles or other settings. You can easily download the full range of Stewardship and Thankoffering materials from our Web site at [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org).

neither clean water to drink, clean air to breathe, nor food to nourish their bodies. May our gifts be used to reconcile the care and use of your creation, we pray:

**C:** We have freely received; may we likewise freely give.

**L:** Comforting God, we pray for healing and wholeness for women and children living in violence, exploitation, or abuse who have neither support nor treatment to care for their body, mind, and spirit, we pray:

**C:** We have freely received; may we likewise freely give.

**L:** Restoring God, make your presence known for all peoples striving for reconciliation in their homes, neighborhoods, and cities; may your spirit empower and equip them to rebuild and renew, we pray:

**C:** We have freely received; may we likewise freely give.

**L:** For the ministries of Women of the ELCA, both in this congregation and throughout the church, that we may continue to serve you and others, we pray:

**C:** We have freely received; may we likewise freely give.

*Other intercessions may be offered here with the response,*

*"We have freely received; may we likewise freely give."*

**L:** Into your hands, gracious God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**C:** Amen.

Adapted from the Monthly Stewardship Devotions

*Devotion on Hebrews 13:5-6*

*Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"*

God has given us life, forgiveness, grace. How do we respond? This text reminds us that our response should be one of confidence; that we should not be afraid of what may lie ahead, but instead believe that our confidence in God can be exemplified through our sacrifice, embodied in our stewardship. Free from the love of wealth and our own possessions, we are empowered to share God's grace and hope for the sake of others. We are all capable of demonstrating our call to care for others and to encourage others to be good stewards in our community of faith.

Our Thankofferings contribute to the Women of the ELCA's annu-

al gift to the ELCA. The ELCA domestic hunger grants committee receives nearly \$1 million annually from throughout the church. Members of that committee read grant requests from around the country that describe the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities. In 2006, 450 hunger grant applications were received—more than 150 more than in 2005. What does that say about how many people are living among us . . . suffering.

Knowing about that suffering, how I can not be aware of the abundant blessings with which I myself live, and which I am free to share? Knowing those stories and having the resources to provide assistance through the greater church body have deepened my own faith and trust in God's good news of hope and healing. I can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid."

Offering Prayer

Good and gracious God, help me hold fast to my confidence in you and to my confession of hope that we may continue to serve our communities, our church, and our world. 🌿

**Emily Hansen** is an associate for programs in the areas of grants, scholarships, and stewardship for Women of the ELCA.





WE RECOMMEND

## Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

### Life stages journal has reflections, prayers

*Living from the Heart of God* is a new journal from Women of the ELCA for women of all ages. It offers reflections and prayers on the many life stages and experiences of women, from first friends to marriage and family life, from buying a home to living with chronic illness. The journal helps women of faith recognize the common threads we share as we grow and change throughout our lives.

Each section includes space to record your own thoughts, prayers, and experiences. In keeping with Women of the ELCA's "Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls" initiative, the journal is oriented toward healing and wholeness in all areas of life. Healthy hearts are created when women of faith work toward a balance in physical, mental, and spiritual health. *Living from the Heart of God* offers the tools to do that. The journal is available through Augsburg Fortress ([www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org), 800-328-4648; ISBN 978-6-0002-1959-8) for \$10.99 plus shipping.

### How you can overcome poverty

A new book, *Our Day to End Poverty: 24 Ways You Can Make a Difference*, invites readers to look at the 24 hours in their day and to begin to think about poverty in new and creative ways.

Authors Sharon Daley-Harris, Jeffrey Keenan, and Karen Speerstra offer practical steps anyone can take to help end extreme poverty, helping readers connect their daily experiences to those of people around the world.

Each chapter takes a task during a typical day and relates it to what we can do to ease the world's suffering. We begin by eating breakfast, so the first chapter focuses on alleviating world hunger. We take the kids to school—what can we do to help make education affordable to all?

The chapters are short, full of specific facts, resources for learning more, and menus of simple, practical action steps.

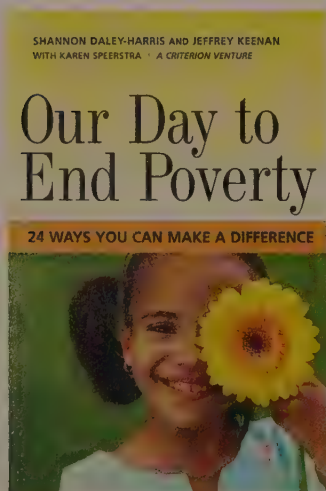
The book is available from bookstores, on-line booksellers, or directly from Berrett Koehler Publishers, [www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com).

### Author shares survival tactics

In her new book, *Living Well While Doing Good* (Seabury Books, 2007), Donna Schaper offers short, humorous chapters on how to enjoy the world while working to save it.

As a maturing activist and busy do-gooder, she struggles against joining the ranks of the socially committed who have become overcommitted and are edging toward burn-out. Her book offers solutions to life's demands and shows how to simplify and balance everything from food, money, romance, and children to conflict, time, and domesticity. She also offers spiritual solutions drawn from her own experience of working for social change.

The book is available from bookstores, [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), or [www.churchpublishing.org](http://www.churchpublishing.org).





## GRACE NOTES

# Prayer and Grace

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



“The meeting ended with prayer and grace.” That phrase caught my eye recently as I read through a synodical women’s organization newsletter. The particular article was about a spring cluster event. The article concluded with a sentence about a midday meal that followed the cluster meeting, so I guess “grace” referred to a meal prayer. The word *grace* has many meanings.

That phrase has stuck with me, but I’ve looked at it a little differently. Instead of a meal prayer, what if *grace* referred to the freely given and unearned love of God? What if everything we did ended—and began, for that matter—with prayer and grace? That is, with prayer and the freely given and unearned love of God?

The reality is that everything we do does begin and end with prayer and grace, but most of the time we are too busy to realize this truth. Often we are too distracted by what’s going on in our lives to lean back into that freely given and unearned love of God. Imagine how our personal and collective lives would be different if we intentionally embraced the truth that everything we do begins and ends with prayer and grace.

The arguments that often mark our business meetings and dinner tables might cease. The impatience we encounter on highways or grocery-store lines might abate. The jealousies and rivalries in our workplaces and neighborhoods would dissipate. Our thoughts and deeds would be more loving. We would build each other up rather than tear each other down. We would think and act

with open-handed generosity, not fearful frugality, trusting in God’s own loving generosity. All our actions would be done for God’s glory, not for our own personal gain.

Our celebration of the Reformation later this month reminds us that we are saved by the grace of God alone (*sola gratia*), that our salvation is through faith alone (*sola fide*), and that the Bible is the norm of doctrine and life (*sola scriptura*).

For the month of October, as a way of celebrating the Reformation, why not begin and end all your efforts with prayer and grace? As you prepare breakfast in your household, for example, offer a prayer of thanksgiving for those who will gather at your table, asking that God might make them open that day to the grace that abounds in their own lives. As you begin your day’s work, offer a prayer of thanks for the work you are given to do and ask that God’s grace might strengthen you for all that the day will bring. As you finish a business appointment or end a circle meeting, thank God for the opportunity to share ideas, to work together, and to accomplish good. As the children or grandchildren arrive home from school or you pull into your driveway after work, thank God for having granted safe travels that day.

My prayer for you this month is that you might find rest and renewal through this new practice or discipline. Grace be with you. 🌿

**Linda Post Bushkofsky** is executive director, Women of the ELCA.

The two journals mentioned are available through Augsburg Fortress.

See [www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org) or call 1-800-328-4648.





AMEN!

## Stuff Breeds Stuff

by Catherine Malotky

When I left home for college, God, my stuff fit into a station wagon, along with my mom, dad, and me. No fancy packing was required, just a few suitcases and a couple of boxes. In no time, we'd carried it all into my new home, half of a small room. My dear parents drove back with an empty car—just the two of them and the promise of more space in their home.

When I moved into my first apartment, my stuff fit into a room. From a friend moving cross-country, I got a great deal on an exceedingly well-used sleeper sofa, a dresser, and a dining-room table with six chairs. I scrounged melon crates when the first cantaloupes of the season showed up in early June. The crates were lighter than 2-by-12 boards, and I didn't have to find any bricks to stack them on. They worked great as cheap shelving!

Slowly, I managed to gather up a kitchen. My mother helped with Christmas and birthday gifts along the way—a waffle iron, slow cooker, mixer. I bought the grater, dish drainer, measuring cups, spices. Then I added a couple of cats for company, and soon enough they had stuff of their own—litter boxes and kitty toys.

I don't remember how I got from that apartment to the house I shared with a colleague. It couldn't have been in my little red subcompact. For the next move, I remember renting a truck. It wasn't stuffed, but it was full. And someone else had to drive the car. I drove the truck full of my stuff, big and clumsy, all the way to a new city. I stored all that stuff

in my parents' basement until I found an apartment and then spilled it all out into the new rooms I called home.

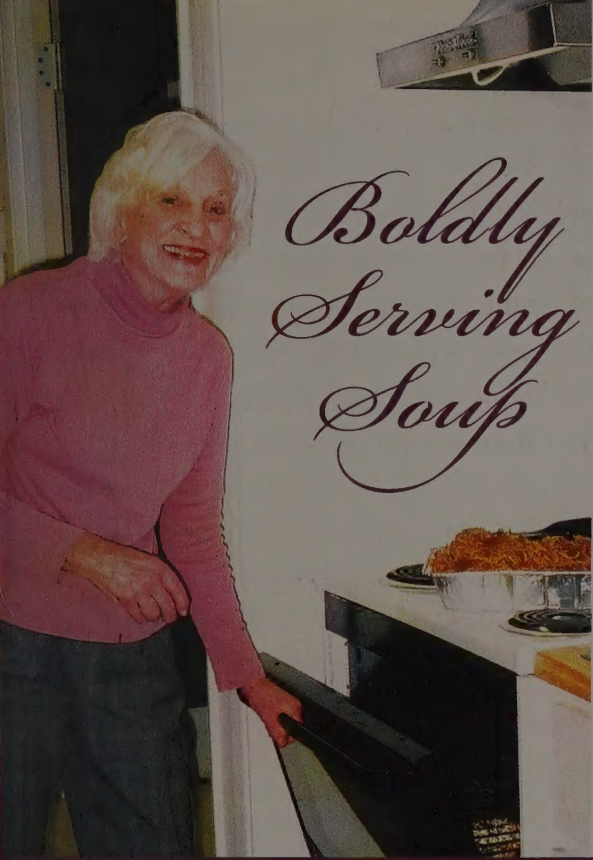
Now, I'd rather not move. Last time it took most of my siblings, their spouses, and a couple of friends to get us and our stuff from one house to another. We had bunk beds and dressers and chairs and drawing tables and boxes of stuff we'd all accumulated over the years—sentimental stuff, like the little rubber dragons we made when we were kids and our daughters' baby teeth. Now I've got plants I'd want to take along, and the things on the walls of my living room. Now I've got a couple of cars, and two large dogs with kennels. Now I've got college loans and retirement savings and an emergency savings account. They aren't heavy, but I need files to keep them straight.

How did this happen? So much stuff! What do I need? What does it take to sustain me and all my stuff? How much money? How much caution, and protection, and organizational brain power? How much of my time and energy?

God, I believe you want everyone to have enough. Help me answer for myself: How much is enough for me? What do I need? And what do I need to give away, that all might know your abundance? Fix my eyes on your largesse—enough for all. Enough for me. Amen. 🌸

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky** serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.





## *Boldly Serving Soup*

Nancy Cissell of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Durant, Oklahoma, had a dream that wouldn't go away. She wanted to start a soup kitchen.

A volunteer at heart and sympathetic to people in need, she was inspired to start a soup kitchen after seeing one at her nephew's church. Nancy enlisted her husband, Richard, to help. Their tiny church offered space for the soup kitchen, but couldn't help financially, so she and Richard solicited donations and supplies. A grant from Women of the ELCA helped them purchase a full-size range and sink.

Since 1999, Our Saviour's Table Soup Kitchen has served meals weekly to "anybody who walks through the door." Even through bouts of serious illness, Nancy continues to serve as head of the project. With the help of volunteers from Our Saviour's and nearby congregations, the soup kitchen serves 50 to 85 guests every week.

*To read the full story, visit [www.womenoftheelca.org/boldwomen](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/boldwomen).*

*—Submitted by Mary Slice, president of the Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synodical Women's organization*

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